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Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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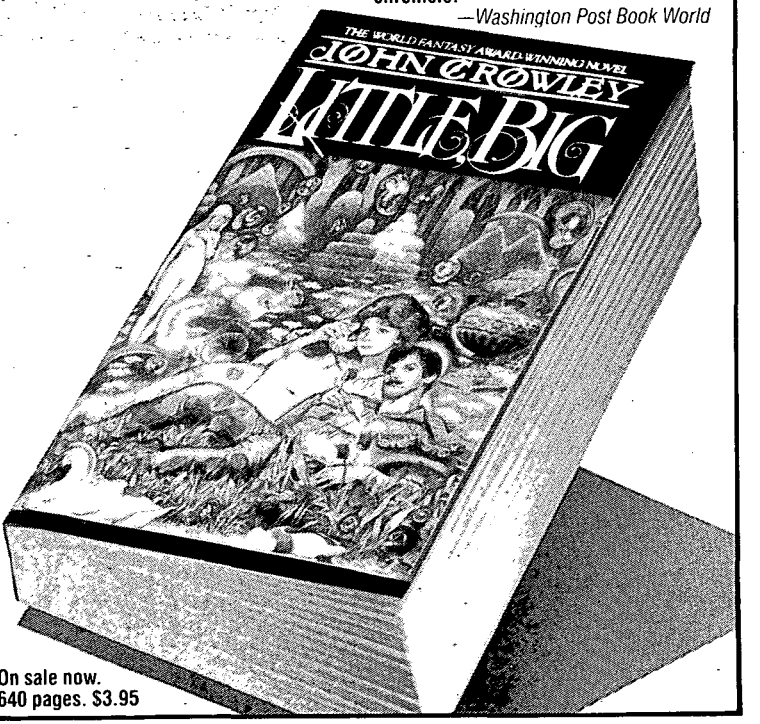

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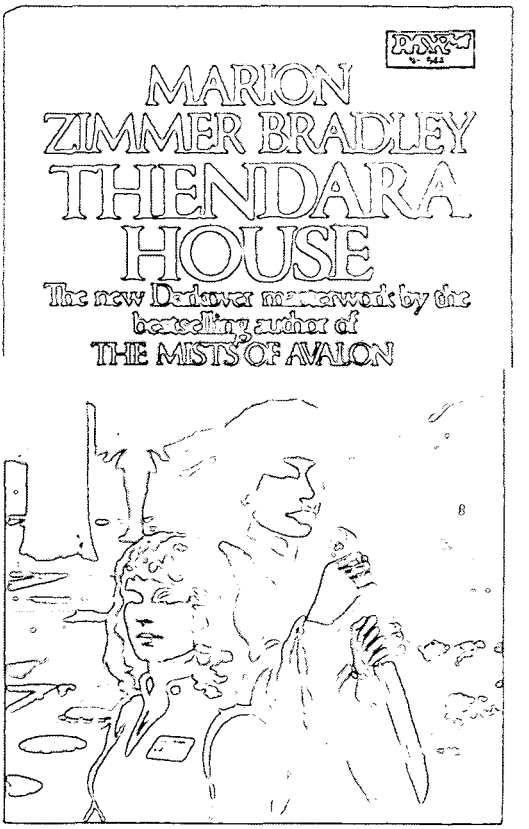

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No sf writer has won more awards than Fritz Leiber, and few have his range and variety. Among his many enthusiasms are cats, and you are sure to be delighted by this tale about the adventures of two curious cats and their "mistress."

The Cat Hotel

BY
FRITZ LEIBER

From the cool patch of floor by the kitchen door Gummitch, an orange cat of endless curiosity and great patience, watched the younger and slenderer gray cat Psycho stand motionless over their water dish, peering down at her reflection. The day was hot, but she did not drink.

Although they were not related, Gummitch felt a big-brotherly concern for Psycho. He wondered if she were studying the mirror world or even considering oversetting the dish to create a water-sculpture as he'd done on occasion.

Or if something sinister were at work.

Kitty-Come-Here, their feather-brained mistress, known to humans as Helen Hunter, stopped in the dining room doorway, a small slender woman in a thin flowered dress carrying a furled green parasol and a small white handbag.

"I've called a taxi, Gummitch," she informed him, "to take me to the Concordia Convalescent Hospital to make polite inquiry of my beloved widowed mother-in-law as to how her broken hip is mending, and sweet worried noises. Though truly it is the great Harry Hunter's place to do that." She sniffed. "Don't you think, Gummitch, his business trips have come most conveniently since the catastrophe? I leave you in charge of the house. Please don't go out and pick a fight with the Mad Eunuch, it's much too sultry. Ah, there's the buzzer. Psycho, if you can stop admiring yourself for a moment and listen to me, be a good kitling and do everything that Gummitch tells you to, bar bedroom stuff. Now good-bye, chaps."

Gummitch himself rather wished that Old Horsemeat were here, not to

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pay dutiful filial visits, but to consult with about Psycho. Except that of late his strange parent-god had been imbibing rather too freely of the second of the two wondrous and terrible evil-tasting human beverages — not mind-quickening coffee, which had the power almost (but not quite, alas) to gift brutes with human speech, but insidious sometimes-burning alcohol, the mocker and jester — and as a result was not to be trusted as much as formerly.

Kitty-Come-Here, the ginger cat had to admit, was showing flashes of unaccustomed thoughtfulness and reliability — though not many or very bright, he hastened to add. Still and all, beneath her solemn kitteny playfulness, there did seem to be something new, serious and mysteriously sad, growing by fits and starts under the bobbed black hair of the little lady who had come to Old Horsemeat (to use his words) from over the Short-waved Ocean, in contradistinction to the Pacific.

The cat heard the front door close.

Somewhat later, at Concordia, Helen Hunter backed smiling and cooing out of Mrs. Hobart Hunter's single dim ground-floor room rather more hurriedly than she'd planned so as not, at all costs, to hear the deep sob she suddenly *knew* was going to burst convulsively from behind the bravely composed face and tightly pressed, serenely smiling lips of the cologne-scented old lady supine in the narrow high bed. For if she did hear it, she'd have to go back and do all her clucking, Harry-excusing work over again, and she as suddenly knew she simply couldn't *bear* that. Panic touched her, and in its unreasoning grip she backed rather faster and farther than she'd intended — all the way into the equally dim double room across the hall.

Gaining some control of herself, she turned around rapidly, surveyed the three beds and three old women crowding the room, and was momentarily shocked moveless and speechless, the contrast with what she had been visiting was so positively scaly.

Her mother-in-law had been tucked in neatly (of course she had a broken hip), while these creatures sprawled all which ways in their nightgowns (after all, it *was* warm) on top of their covers and pillows with all sorts of resultant untidy, immodest, even obscene disclosures.

In the single room there were a few neatly arranged objects on the bedside table and nothing whatever on the top sheet save Mrs. Hobart Hunter's pale flaccid arms extended decorously down her sides. Here all three beds and tabletops were littered with a jumble of soiled crumpled tissues, hair-holding combs and brushes, candy boxes, lunch remnants, paper cups, photographs, books, papers, and magazines, mostly astrology.

Harry's mother had been recently washed and neatly groomed, smelled of cologne.

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These women had elf-locked or straggly flying hair, what there was of it, smeared lipstick, were smudged with dirt, looked greasy. They had a variety of odors about them. Really, they stank.

The first old woman had scrawny legs, a chunky pot-bellied body, and a little screwed-up face with squinting eyes and a button nose that would have looked scowly-angry except her small mouth was smiling.

The secónd old woman was fat like a little bumpy mountain with immense hips, droopy jowls, and large peering pop-eyes.

The third old woman was skinny as death itself, had a blotched pallor all over, a curving beak of a nose, and no chin to speak of. An empty brass cage hung beside her bed.

Helen took in all this in three rapid snapshots, as it were. A couple more seconds and she might have recovered her poise, but just then the first old woman asked with a chuckle, "Lose your way, dearie?"

"Something frighten you, chickie?" the third old woman chimed like a cracked bell.

"Well, you certainly aren't my niece Andrea," the second old woman observed in a voice like suet.

"No, I don't believe I am," Helen started to say inanely and broke off midway, flustered.

"My, what a lovely green parasol," the third old woman continued.

"And what lovely bobbed hair. You do look cool," the first old woman added enviously.

"You look nice enough to eat," the second old lady concluded in her flannel tones.

"Oh, do please excuse me," Helen began and then turned and ran out before she garbled anything more or yielded to the impulse to respond to the last remark with "Is *that* what made you so fat, you dirty old cannibal?"

In her hurry she turned the wrong way in the hall, and rather than repass Mrs. Hobart Hunter's door and risk hearing snuffles, she left the Concordia by the way of the door to the concrete-surfaced "patio" surrounded on three sides by a tall hedge, which was simply the backyard of the one-story convalescent hospital and figured as an airing spot for the mostly elderly patients.

It was empty now, save for a few white tables and chairs in need of a paint job, and very hot. Helen unfurled her parasol and departed by the one exit available if you didn't want to go back through the Concordia, a two-foot gap in the back hedge — she had to tip her parasol to get through.

She emerged in an untidy, unpaved alley with garbage cans. From the newspapers scattered arc ınd them the words "Korea," "239 Communists," "McCarthy," and "Rosenbergs" leaped up, reminding her of how Harry had said to Gummitch, "We live in a witch-hunt age, you hear me, cat? They got

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the diplomats and movie actors. They'll be after writers next, writers and cats. Remember how the Inquisition got after you along with the witches? Maybe the FBI will come for you and me at the same time."

Across the alley was another tall hedge with a matching gap in it, through which she could see a wedge of very green lawn that looked much more attractive than the littered sandy alley, so she pressed on through, tipping her parasol again and noting that the way underfoot was somewhat worn, as if these back exits were in regular use.

The gap was in a back corner of the property she entered. Straight ahead of her, the intensely green lawn stretched to the next street and was so thick and springy underfoot she was reminded of her native England.

There emerged into view a neat two-story wooden Victorian house whose gleaming white paint put the Concordia to shame. By its back door there was parked a shining white motor scooter with a white box fixed behind its sheepskin saddle. A narrow walk of pale gravel led from it close around the house to the next street.

Just next to Helen at the back of the property was a large area enclosed by a neat mesh-wire fence several feet higher than the hedge. Inside it were more lawn, three graceful low trees, some tidy bushes, two flower beds, and a low summer house (it looked) white as the main building with a white scrollwork sign over its open door that read, in much-serifed black letters, "Wicks Cat Hotel."

As she strolled wonderingly forward around the enclosure, Helen congratulated herself that her green parasol and flowered dress suited her very well to this handsome environment. Thank goodness, she told herself, she'd washed her hair and taken a shower just before coming out.

Coming around in front of the enclosure, where there was a latched door in the mesh, she surveyed it more closely, at once spotting a tranquil Himalayan on a tiny platform in one of the low trees and two strolling lilac-point Siamese slender as fashion models. The longer she looked, the more cats she saw ensconced in the bushes, sniffing the flowers, and wandering in and out of the little building, all of them elegant and well behaved, a few rather plain tabbies among the aristocracy, which included a blue Persian, a crinkly coated dark silver Rex, and a Havana brown who positively flamed. She said aloud softly, "Oh, Gummitch, if you could see this. A positive cat heaven!"

"Some persons do voice that reaction. But who is Gummitch, pray?"

Helen turned to face a trim woman her own age, two inches taller, fully as slender, but a degree sturdier than herself. A straw blonde, she wore her hair cropped and white slacks and Nehru jacket at once medical, military, and chic. Her right eye was deep blue, the other brown.

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"He's my cat," Helen said eagerly, and when the other did not at once respond volunteered, "I'm Helen Hunter."

"Wendy Wicks," the other responded, extending her hand. "I'm the proprietor. Do I rightly discern in your speech a British accent with the lilt of Wales?"

Nodding, Helen countered, "And I a Scots?"

"Truly enough, though I come from the Lakes. Which makes us fellow countrymen," the other said approvingly, adding an extra squeeze to their handshake. "Would you care to look inside?" She unlatched the mesh door. Helen furled her parasol.

The guests of the Wicks Hotel took no notice of them. Inside the low white building the two women stood comfortably enough, though Helen noted Harry would have had to stoop here. It was all one room lined with about sixty comfortably large cages in three tiers, each with its rug, water and food dish, and cat-box. The floor was occupied only by some hassocks, a climbing frame, and an imposing gray Tudor castle of stout cardboard with numerous cat-size windows and doors.

Helen echoed herself with, "A cat paradise!"

Wendy ended her little talk with, "Some of our guests are quite long-term, while their mistresses go to New York or London for the plays, or on extended ocean cruises," and gave Helen a hotel card on which her first name was spelled "Wendele," had the initials "D.V.M" behind, and there was the subscript "hospital facilities available."

Wendy said, "The next time you're out of town, Gummitch might enjoy our hospitality. That is, unless he's an unneutered male."

"He is," Helen informed her. "My husband, Harry, has very fixed ideas upon that point—"

"I know," the other interposed with a touch of venom, "men are apt to entertain such barbarous notions."

"—and so do I, I was going to say," Helen concluded bravely.

Wendy caught her hand and squeezed it, saying with a disarming smile, "There are, of course, my dear, good arguments, aside from patristic ones, to be made for that position. Even the Amazons had to make compromises. Why, I've taken toms myself in the hospital. Come, let me show you that."

Helen followed her out of the hotel and its grounds up to the back door of the Victorian house. As they passed the motor scooter Wendy touched it, saying, "Our ambulance," then, as she opened the white door beyond, "The Wicks Cat Hospital! No other species accepted!"

Inside was a spotless veterinary examination — and, Helen supposed, emergency room — everyting cat-sized and -adapted. Suspended on brass wires from points along the skull, spine, and tail was the complete skeleton of a cat,

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which struck her as rather grisly. A large 1953 calendar on the wall featured phases of the moon.

Wendy said, "Wait a minute and I'll show you our isolation ward for infectious cases. I'll call you," and she pushed through one of the two inner doors.

Helen peeked after her in time to see her draw a black curtain in front of three cages like those in the hotel, then drew back a little guiltily.

"Come in," Wendy called and when Helen had complied pointed out three glass-fronted large white boxes against the wall opposite the three curtained cages.

"Our isolation cubicles," she explained. "They have their own ventilation system."

Two of the boxes were empty. The other held a young seal-point Siamese, who peered out at them bright-eyed enough.

"I detected a mild respiratory infection in this one of our guests," Wendy explained, "and am treating it with antibiotics. She'll probably return to the hotel tomorrow." The phone in the examination room rang. "Excuse me," she said.

Alone, after a few seconds Helen yielded to curiosity. She crossed the room and started to lift a corner of the black curtain.

"Mrs. Hunter!" the other called from the doorway, "do you realize that cats are subject to certain diseases in which their eyes become temporarily hypersensitive to light? You might have permanently injured one of our patients."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Helen said, backing off.

"I think you had best leave," the other went on in a gruff doctor voice, and as she escorted a flurried Helen through the other inside door of the examination room through a long old-fashioned parlor with a large fireplace, continued formidably, "In the past, Mrs. Hunter, persons have gained entry to these premises under false pretences with the intention of kidnapping valuable cats to hold for ransom and for even worse purposes!" Her mismatched eyes flashed coldly.

"You surely don't think that I—" Helen began, more apologetic than indignant.

"No, I suppose not, I guess," Wendy replied with sudden and surprising return to her earlier amiability, "but after all, Helen, I have showed you everything here, and I'm sure that we both have other things to do." She led Helen into a front hall with a wide staircase leading to the second story. Then, as she let her out the front door, where a brass plate read "Wicks Cat Hospital," she gave Helen's hand a final squeeze and said with a smile, "Come back for another visit, dear, anytime you wish. Only remember that I'm another lone Britisher in an alien land and a profession dominated by arrogant males, so I have become overly sensitive and suspicious."

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Hastening home by bus, Helen's feelings were mixed. She still felt drawn to Wendy. Such a strong, handsome, competent girl with a really beautiful face if you made allowance (if that were needed) for slightly overlarge upper center incisors and rather long large ears, though growing close to the skull, and of course the intriguing blue-brown eye pair. Why, it was years and years since she'd noticed so much about a person she'd met only once. Am I becoming infatuated? she asked herself with a silent giggle.

But then, on the other hand, the veterinary's sudden exaggerated hostility and the rather shivery details of the cat skeleton and black curtain. What had been behind that, anyway? The light-sensitive story was surely a blind because the light in the "isolation ward" had been on when the doctor'd first gone in and drawn the curtain.

And yet at the same time the whole place had reminded her so much and so nostalgically of England — the lawn, the house and cat motel, the woman herself — half-awakening deep-buried memories of all sorts, some of them, Helen felt sure, very strange.

When she left the bus, the day, though more sultry than ever, had darkened, and when she stuck her key in her own front door, she heard a low rumble of thunder.

Gummitch was waiting inside, uttering a "Mrrp-Mrrp!" in which there was more alarm and indignation than greeting. He ran halfway up the stairs and then paused to look back over his shoulder. Heart sinking, Helen followed him to the upstairs bathroom, where Psycho lay curled motionless in the pale green washbowl as though it was a cat sarcophagus. The young cat seemed only half-conscious; her eyes were filmed, her short gray fur was rough, her nose hot.

Helen carried her downstairs to the phone and dialed the number on the card given her by Wendy, who answered on the third ring, listened to Helen's rapid description, and said only, "Don't do anything. I'll be there."

Waiting would have been easier for Helen if she'd been told to do something. She opened the front door to the gathering dark and low growling thunder. She asked, "Whatever happened, Gummitch? Did Pycho go out and eat something?" But the orangy cat answered only, "Mrrp-Mrrp!" Finally she called a taxi.

As if that had been the proper charm to hurry events, there was a purring "put-put" from down the street. Going to the door with Gummitch close beside her, she saw that the approaching storm had banished twilight and brought on instant night, into which the pale shape of the hospital scooter and rider came like the ghost of a modern centaur. It nosed into the driveway, then rode diagonally across the lawn to park at the foot of the front steps.

Wendy was now wearing additionally a white cap with rather long visor,

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and she stripped off white gauntlets as she came up the steps, carefully took Psycho into her arms, and briefly examined her.

"She's very sick and must be taken to the hospital at once and given treatment," she pronounced. "I'll have a full report for you tomorrow morning. Don't worry too much: she's a young cat and I believe we've caught it in time. Her chances of complete recovery are very good." All this while carrying Psycho down the steps, gently laying her in the box behind the saddle, which opened at a touch, and getting astride the vehicle, having thrust her gauntlets in the top of her slacks.

"Good-bye, chaps," she called as she drove off carefully at an even pace.

It all happened so fast that Helen, who'd hurried down the steps with Gummitch after her, couldn't think what to call back. But now as they both watched the white scooter disappear down the dark street, she said, "Oh, Gummitch, what have we done to Psycho?"

"Warra warra," the cat replied, concerned and somewhat angry. He hadn't liked the cat doctor's looks, and he also believed that his own close presence was in any case something essential to Psycho's safety and recovery.

Thunder rumbled, closer now.

A taxicab drew up. Its driver got out and, seeing Helen, opened the rear door and came a few steps up the walk.

She arrived at a quick decision, called to him, "I'll just get my bag and wrap; be with you in a second," and ran up the steps into the house, thinking Gummitch had run back ahead of her; cars often had that effect on him.

But the cat had other ideas. He'd circled off sideways into the darkness, made a craftily wide circle through some bushes, and sneaked into the cab when the driver wasn't looking.

Inside he did not spring on the seat, but instead crouched in the dark far corner of the floor. He did not intend the investigations he had in mind to be thwarted. And indeed when Kitty-Come-Here got in, she was so busy giving the driver instructions as to where the Wicks Cat Hospital was, and so agitated generally, that she actually didn't notice him. She slung her light coat on the seat beside her, and it trailed over, further concealing him.

Gummitch congratulated himself on his sagacity. What doesn't move in the shadows, isn't seen. Old Horsemeat had more than once recited to him Eliot's poem about McCavity, the mystery cat modeled on Professor Moriarty, and if there were a Moriarty, there had to be a cat Sherlock Holmes, didn't there?

When the cab drew up at the newly repainted old white house with the brass plate beside the door and Kitty-Come-Here got out, saying to the driver, "Please wait for me," Gummitch slid out right behind her and immediately ducked under the vehicle, preparatory to beginning another of his

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wide circles. Geometric evasiveness, that's one more of my methods, he told himself.

Helen mounted to the open porch and pushed the buzzer, and when it wasn't answered quickly, plied the brass knocker, too. But when the door was finally opened, it was by an unsmiling and doctor-faced Wendy, who did not move aside to let her in.

"It's past visiting hours," she said coldly. "Really, Helen, I know you're concerned about your cat, but you mustn't become hysterical. You can't see Psycho now in any case; she's in isolation."

"But you didn't even tell me what's wrong with her," Helen protested.

"Very well. Your cat is suffering from epidemic feline enteritis, the most widespread and dangerous cat plague of them all, one for which early immunization is a necessary precaution observed by all half-way informed owners. But you never had shots for her, did you? No, I thought not. Perhaps your husband doesn't believe in that, either."

Gummitch watched the two from the next to the top step of the stairs to the porch, only his narrowed eyes showing over. When the cat doctor was in the midst of her condescending and reproachful lecture, he flowed up onto the porch and along it to the second window from the door, which was open wide at the bottom, and softly looped through, hugging the wall and sill, into the dim large room beyond.

Outside, the cat doctor continued, "What treatment is she getting? I injected serum and water in proper quantity, gave by mouth a chemical agent I've had good results with, and disposed her comfortably in an isolation cubicle, where she is getting *rest*, which is something even veterinary doctors require and get on rare occasions, and you no doubt could do with yourself. Please do not call before 9 A.M. tomorrow. Good night, dear Helen." And she closed the door.

After a moment of staring at it with both fists clenched, Helen returned to her cab, disconsolate and fuming delicately. The driver asked her, "Excuse me, lady, but did you have a cat with you in there when we came over?"

"Certainly not!" she replied impatiently. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," the driver responded warily. "I just thought. ..." His voice trailed off.

I shouldn't have been so short with him, she told herself. Natural of him to suppose that when you go to a cat hospital you take a cat. Probably thought I had it wrapped in my coat or something.

Nevertheless, the matter worried her a little. Now she wouldn't feel easy until she'd seen Gummitch. But when she did, at least she could speak out her mind to him, relieve her injured feelings a little. Oh, that wicked (but so dashing) doctor woman!

In the Wicks Cat Hospital living

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room, Gummitch had immediately found a good hiding place under an easy chair against a wall, from which he could survey the whole room, study the black carpet with its curious designs in white lines, and wait until things settled down before beginning his detective work — see which way the cat doctor was going to jump, you might put it.

After shutting the door on Helen, she came rapidly through the living room (Gummitch saw only her trousered legs footed with white oxfords) and went through the swinging door at its back end. Outside, thunder crackled. The storm was definitely getting nearer.

After enough time for Gummitch to go into a half-doze, the cat doctor returned, setting the swinging door wide open, he was happy to see, though he could have managed it himself, he was confident, as well as many knobs and some latches.

She moved more thoughtfully this time, going to one of the bookcases and selecting a volume to take with her, before exiting to the front hall, leaving dimmed lights behind her everywhere. He heard her going upstairs.

Helen was in a quandary. She'd paid off the taxi driver, tipping him generously to make up for her shortness with him, but when she'd gone into the house there'd been no Gummitch to greet her and hear what she thought of the doctor woman. He might have gone out through the cat door, of course, on some business of his own, but wouldn't he have waited to ask her about Psycho? Had the taxi driver really seen a cat? Despite Wendy's warning she dialed again the number on the card, but this time got only an answering service which could just take messages to give the doctor when and if she called in. Outside, thunder boomed. Helen didn't like being all alone in the house.

Back in the living room of the cat hospital, the cat-detective still bided his time under the easy chair. After another period of waiting, during which there were faint footsteps overhead that finally ceased — the cat doctor's and someone else's, still lighter but thumpy ones — Gummitch ventured out and unhurriedly made his way toward the back of the room, frequently pausing to sniff. Outside, the crackling came more often, and suddenly he heard the patter, then the pelting of swift-breaking rain, and from the window behind him felt a breath of chilly storm-breeze.

The white-line pattern on the black carpet was a curious one of triangles and triskelions and swastikas, and just in front of the cold, empty but practical fireplace and with one of its five points aimed straight at it, a huge empty star. There welled up in his mind a murky racial memory of an even wider hearth with a huge fire blazing in it and naked women standing before it in a pentacle and rubbing into each other's bodies an ointment that had a not alto-

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gether unpleasing acrid odor.

Gummitch glided into the examination room, saw the hanging cat skeleton, hissed under his breath, then sprang to the table before it, and gave it an experimental pat. The little bones rattled softly and the skull swung a bit, as if to see who its disturber was.

He next entered the isolation ward, the door of which was also set open. Perhaps because of the soft purr of their ventilation system, his gaze fixed at once on the three glass-fronted isolation cubicles, and he leaped lightly to the shelf in front of them.

In the cubicle Psycho lay on her side with eyes closed and ears drooped. He couldn't repress a mew of excitement, then, with his muzzle pressed against the glass, mewed softly twice more and rapped the pane lightly with a paw. She did not stir.

The young Siamese in the next cubicle was making motions at him, but Gummitch ignored her, continuing to study Psycho. He could discern her gray chest rise and fall a little, regularly, while her fur looked a little brighter than it had in the pale green washbowl, he thought — or hoped.

He reminded himself then that he was a detective in enemy territory and couldn't afford to give way for long to dumb dutifulness. With an effort he tore his gaze away from Psycho's window, turned to survey the rest of the isolation ward, and saw for the first time the three now uncurtained wire cages against the opposite wall.

The fur on his back rose and his tail thickened.

In the first cage was a little old dog with squinched-up face and beady eyes that glared at him continuously, a black Pekinese.

In the second cage was an animal of the same shape as the little green frogs he'd seen hoping around in the spring. Only this one was bigger and fatter, with warts. And it didn't hop, but just crouched slumpingly and fixed upon him its large cold, cold eyes. It was the same color as the dog.

On a low perch in the third cage was a rather large bird which Gummitch knew to be a parrot because the Mad Eunuch's owner kept a bright green one with a big yellow beak. But this one was mangy and ancient-looking and malevolent-eyed, while its wickedly curving beak pointed straight at him. Both its beak and its ragged feather coat were inky black.

The little dog coughed hackingly, and thunder crashed outside as if the heavens were riven, while the great glare of lightning that simultaneously shone through the open doorway called Gummitch's attention to a fourth ebon beast just now hopped there and regarding him with an intelligence that seemed greater and more evil than that of the others.

It was an animal that Gummitch had never seen before, but thought because of its overlarge front top teeth must be related to squirrels, one of whom had terrified him in kittenhood

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when they'd first seen each other close from opposite sides of a window. And it had long, tall ears. Gummitch could only imagine it to be a deformed giant tailless squirrel, the product of mad science or vile sorcery.

Now it turned and, as lightning flared again and thunder crashed, hopped — to report, Gummitch was suddenly sure, to the cat doctor. The fearless cat-detective reached an instant decision and leaped down and raced after. The monstrous beast crossed the living room in four long hops, but Gummitch could readily match that speed, he found. In the front hall at the foot of the stairs, the beast turned at bay, making mewling sounds. Gummitch advanced on it stiff-legged and back arched, involuntarily letting out a loud and most undetectivelike caterwaul.

Then he saw beyond it the cat doctor coming down the stairs. She was stark naked, bore in her hand a long yellowish knife with a red hilt, and glared at him, the lips of her small mouth parted in a snarl that revealed her large front teeth.

He retreated to the living room. She came after, her knife advanced before her, followed by the black hopping giant squirrel-monster. Gummitch cast one longing look at the open window, but then remembered his responsibilites. To the accompaniment of the storm's hammer blows and flashes, he raced twice around the room to baffle them, then darted through the examination room back into the isolation ward. They came after him relentlessly. From atop Psycho's cubicle he caterwauled defiance. They came up to it.

But then the storm's final and climatic thunder-crash and dazzling lightning-flare revealed to all three of them a new figure framed in the doorway, a rather small person wearing a dripping yellow oilskin and a deep-brimmed sou'wester.

It was Kitty-Come-Here, and she cried out, "Gummitch! I knew I'd find you here!"

Gummitch's fur relaxed a little. Wendy shoved the knife under some papers on the table beside her. The black squirrel-monster mewled innocently.

Kitty-Come-Here eyed the three of them in turn, taking her time about it, and then her gaze went on to the three occupants of the wire cages. At last she cried out comprehendingly, "Wendy, you are a *witch*. And that black rabbit there is your familiar. And although you claim this is a hospital for cats only, you've been treating or boarding the *familiars* of those three dreadful old women (all witches, of course; you probably have a whole coven!) in the Concordia in the room opposite my mother-in-law's. The resemblances are all unmistakable and prove my case. And when there's no outsider to see, you go around naked — "sky-clad" is your witch expression for that, isn't it? And you were chasing Gummitch and

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trying to do something to him, weren't you?"

Wendy reached a lab smock from a hook on the wall and shouldered into it leisurely. "Why, I never heard a more ridiculous set of ideas in my whole life," she said guilelessly. "It's true I sometimes bend the hospital's only-one-species rule a little, and it wouldn't do to advertise that to the mistresses of our guests. And I have a pet hare, drop a curtsy, dear Bunnykins! Cats are wonderful, but one needs a break from them when one sees them all the time. And I do occasionally doctor or board pets of patients in the Concordia, both apt to be elderly for obvious reasons. Any psychologist will tell you, dear Helen, that people, especially elderly ones, grow to resemble their pets, or else select them with that point unconsciously in mind. I habitually sleep raw, and tonight when Bunnykins and I discovered loose in the hospital what we took to be a stray tom bent on rapine (how could I know he was your Gummitch, dear?), we were seeking to eject him, that is all. There, does that answer your questions?"

"I don't think so," Helen said stoutly. "Why are all these animals *black*, I want to know? And what were you hiding when I came in?"

"I have a deep professional interest in melanism," Wendy told her. "And by the by, how *did* you get in?"

"When no one answered the door, I climbed through the open window, and now I'm glad I did! You still haven't told me—"

A joyous meow! from Gummitch interrupted this interchange. He was looking in Psycho's window. The young grey cat lifted her head a little and opened her eyes, which were no longer filmed with sickness, but bright with cat intelligence. She was smiling at Gummitch and them all. Though obviously still very weak and quite haggard-looking, she was clearly on the road to recovery.

This most happy occurence rather put an end to serious accusations of witchcraft and other ill-feeling, and when Wendy insisted on serving them tea in a pot with an English Union Jack on it, with milk to go with it and seed-cake, and with a saucer of milk for Gummitch, peace was fully sealed. Gummitch drank a third of his milk to please Kitty-Come-Here, though keeping a most wary eye on the cat doctor and Bunnykins, who appeared to resent that name, the cat judged, though continuing to act the innocent fool.

Afterward, going home by taxi, Helen told Gummitch, "I still think she may be a witch, you know, but a rather nice one, just being kind to some dirty old sister witches — ugh, old as *Macbeth!* — and their sick animals. And she did have to admit you were most well-behaved, Gummitch, for a tom. I think that's a lot, coming from her. And you *did* uncover the whole thing, whatever it was, you know, you clever, sneaky cat. You broke through

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her British reticence, all right. She'd have played snob-doctor all night, otherwise. And did you notice, Gummitch, she had the slimmest and most stalwart body and the darlingest little breasts, almost as small as mine. I'm sure we're leaving Psycho in very good hands. But how should we tell Old Horsemeat about all this, Gummitch, when he comes back from his business-revels? Not everything, I think, though of course he'd love it all for one of his stories."

Gummitch decided she was still pretty featherbrained.

"I hereby claim this planet on behalf of ... er, ... Intelligent creatures of this planet, we come in peace."

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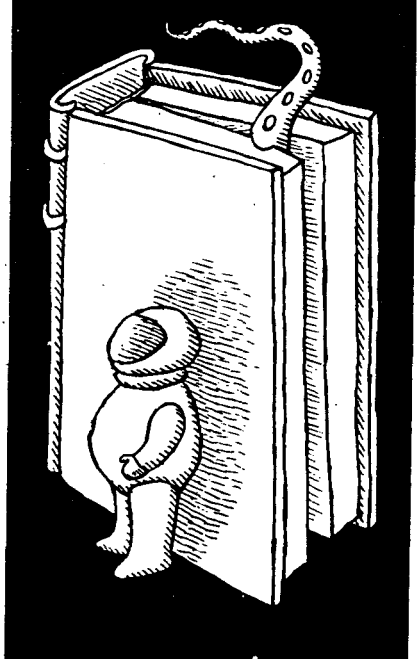
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



The 57th Franz Kafka, Rudy Rucker, Ace, $2.50

Tea With the Black Dragon, R.A. MacAvoy, Bantam, $2.75

Benefits, Zoë Fairbairns, Avon/Bard, $2.95

Millennium, John Varley, Berkley, $6.95

and:
Skyripper, David Drake, Tor, $3.50

The Shadow of The Ship, Robert Wilfred Franson, Del Rey, $2.75

As you know, many SF books are paperback originals — first editions that walk like reprints. If you can't remember whether there was a preceding hardcover — "trade" — edition of that title (I often can't), the way to tell is that the reprint will carry blurbs like "__ Weeks on the N.Y. Times List!" and the lines that quote high praise will be attributed to sources such as "PW," "Kirkus," and the like. The original, on the other hand, will carry the line "Best Thing I've Read in Years!" and this will be attributed to Roger Zelazny or Harlan Ellison, unless the book is by a woman. In that case, the blurb is apt to be attributed to a female author who also apparently does nothing with her time except read advance galleys of pending paperback originals.

Some paperback imprints often or always mean the book is an original. Fawcett Gold Medal Books, Lion Library and Regency Books titles were all originals. Ballantine Books was founded in the early 1950s with the policy of originating simultaneous

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soft- and hard-bound editions. But the hard copy was printed from the paperback-size plates and bound in something that made it look like a flattened Big Little Book, so that idea was soon dropped and Ballantine was a mixed originals and reprint softcover house for a long time thereafter.

Many of Ballantine's originals, you will remember, were SF titles; many major novels, a raft of important story collections, and the Frederik Pohl-edited *Star* series of original anthologies. Lion titles included the first novels of Damon Knight and some fellow with a Lithuanian name, and Gold Medal's list carried Richard Matheson's first novel, *I Am Legend*, as well as a few other SF titles that have since been seen as pioneering work in the field.

The fact is that the paperback original has always been seen as a somewhat raffish medium. It is the Robin Hood of commercial publishing, and the circumstances surrounding paperback origination tend to remind one of the good old days in Sherwood Forest. In recent years, this has been made even more whimsical by the issuance of simultaneous or fore-running "trade" editions with softcover imprints such as Berkley, Del Rey, or Timescape, and even Bantam, which is rarely an originator.

What's more, a fair number of the trade editions from trade houses such as Doubleday, Simon & Schuster or St. Martin's were actually originated by paperback editors who, for one reasons or another and in one way or another felt there was more to be made if the story first appeared in trade hardback (don't ask about the milieu of trade paperbacks) — with the softcover house of course sharing the income if it in effect agented the manuscript to the trade — and the originator thus assumed the role of reprinter. Clear?

Ah, well. How does this happen? It happens, part of the time it happens, because the paperback editor had the manuscript under contract before it existed, and when it came in it turned out to have some features — call it "the texture" — of a trade book. The reason the manuscript went straight to a particular paperback house instead of circulating through the trade market first is often that the author had made a deal, involving fast money in advance, based on an outline of the proposed novel. Authors are often in need of fast money, and paperback originators are more flexible about things like that. Some of these outlines have consisted of a few blurred lines penned on a cocktail napkin. Usually, the successful presentation is a bit more formal than that, but you get the idea of how things sometimes go in the forest.

All of this hints at a perception that the paperback original is expected to be somehow less textured than a "real" book. This used to be true almost invariably; it's still true fairly often. Nevertheless, as we've seen, the paperback originals market is rather more

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complex than any simple view could encompass.

What makes it important to SF is that conservative media tend to publish safe text, and therefore such unconventional media as the paperback original have always been more hospitable to SF. Then, within SF, which has developed its own "respectable" houses and its shall we say more daring ones, there has been a further evolutionary process such that many of our most interesting titles since SF entered the mass market in the early 1950s, and most of the books that broke new ground, have come from the scruffier end of the spectrum.

The paperback originators are not always a salvage market, picking up the leavings of the trade. But as a side effect of how they operate, they do tend to get the books the trade editors suspect are good but can't satisfactorily explain to the publisher and/or sales force. Among SF's pioneering editors, no one has understood this situation better than Donald A. Wollheim, who began creating landmark originals with *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* in 1943, and has never stopped since. Way stations enroute to DAW Books were places like Avon and the Ace Books of the Double Novel days, and someday someone with the importance of accurate SF history at heart will write the definitive study of Wollheim's massive contributions to SF.

What counts in our more generalized view here is that back in the 1950s, Wollheim was publishing the first novels of people like Samuel R. Delany, Marion Zimmer Bradley if I'm not mistaken, and Philip K. Dick.*

Dick's is the classic case we want to look at. Prior to 1955 and 1956, when Wollheim brought out his first two novels, *Solar Lottery* and *The World Jones Made*, Dick had been perceived as a clever if bitter short-story writer.

It wasn't a bad career, but it wasn't clearly going anywhere. And it certainly didn't look as if Dick were anything particularly special. He wasn't as funny as Sheckley when commenting on human foibles; he was, truth to tell, rather tiresomely hortatory. And when he tried to be funny, he approached humor with the heavy hand of someone who's made a careful study of the mode. When he set out to tell a plain tale plainly, he wasn't as easy to read as Michael Shaara or J.T. M'intosh or two or three other contemporaries. Most of all, he didn't seem to be carving out his own niche, and there were plenty of people — Poul Anderson, James Blish, Theodore Sturgeon and Isaac Asimov among them, with Pohl and Kornbluth coming up fast — who were were working the territory he

**Actually, Bradley's first Ace novel, which is probably her first novel, appeared in 1961 according to the Curry Index. But there's no question Wollheim's Ace Books was vital to her career; meanwhile, however, this is about Phil Dick.*

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seemed to prefer.

Now, if you look at *Solar Lottery* today. you're not going to see much precursor of *Valis* or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.* What you will see is a clear attempt — an attempt far more successful than James Blish's or Damon Knight's contemporaneous attempts — to write a rational story based on A.E. van Vogt's maniacal formula. And in *The World Jones Made* you're going to see a wholly successful one, which means Dick is the only writer to ever pull it off, and that includes van Vogt himself.

What this told us in the 1950s was that Dick deliberately hadn't settled into any grooves; that he was learning the business from the fundamentals up, studying his predecessors, exploring how they did it, and perhaps getting ready to push beyond that. Certainly, the two novels betrayed the presence of an intelligence, education and wit considerably beyond the minimum required for a merely successful career. Those hopes for his future were pretty well borne out, too.

I have no idea how Wollheim got hold of those manuscripts. I do think, on what appear to be pretty solid grounds, that they were probably kicking around for some years, going through the rather sparse trade book market of the time and getting rejected. Probably, they were being treated either as parodies or, at the hands of less knowledgeable editors, as not being much like *Pebble in the Sky* or Lancelot Biggs, Spaceman. They were, a little, like *The Demolished Man* and *The Space Merchants.* But Bester's novel had been published by Shasta after falling through the mass market, and Ballantine had brought out the Pohl/Kornbluth. So Ballantine was hardly likely to bring out a generally less marketable "copy" — *Solar Lottery* not having seen anything equivalent to serialization in *Galaxy* — and if Simon & Schuster didn't want the most sensational major magazine serial in years, which is what *The Demolished Man* was, what were the odds on this nearly total unknown?

I would guess that, Lion Books having folded its $1500 advance and crept away, and Gold Medal buying only SF that Knox Burger could understand, Ace got the books for about $1000. (I don't know whether it may have been $1000 each. Knowing the business methods and the distribution practices connected with Ace's corporation at the time, I'd be astonished to hear there was ever any further income to Dick from those editions.)

That's life in the originals racket, and it hasn't really changed all that much; it certainly hasn't kept up with inflation, but on the other hand the royalty statements are a bit more reliable, thanks to the SFWA's having an attorney on retainer. The thing is, though, that to a writer in Dick's shoes, getting published on almost any terms at all, particularly in view of the experimental though viable nature of

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the material, was the crucial thing. You have to think, in looking at the record in this case and in many other cases, that catch-as-catch-can though it all may have been, the energy and ingenuity of the paperback originators has been the major evolutionary influence on SF since mid-century.

And since Dick was the most noteworthy early beneficiary of all that, it makes sense that there should now be a Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for the best American paperback original of the year.

It was launched last year by a jury consisting of Thomas M. Disch, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Norman Spinrad. The winner gets a (very) little money and a handsome certificate suitable for framing. It may grow over the years; certainly, last year's three judges were uniquely qualified to flatter the winner by their recognition, considering that *The Left Hand of Darkness* was one of Terry Carr's Ace Specials, *The Genocides* was a Berkley Medallion, and of Norman Spinrad's first eight books, five — the best five — were paperback originals. (A later Disch was bound back to back with a LeGuin as an Ace Double).

This year, he quoted without comment, the judges are John Clute, scholar Anthony Wolk, and sometime novelist Algis Budrys. So if you notice in the course of calendar 1983's columns that I've overlooked your favorite nominee, drop me a line c/o F&SF's Connecticut address. The first American edition is what counts, so M. John Harrison's *The Floating Gods*, for instance, is eligible, despite earlier appearance as an English hardbound.

Meanwhile, here are some other titles on my short list so far:

The 57th Franz Kafka is a story collection by Rudy Rucker, last year's Award winner for his novel, *Software*. It's a dandy, and very much in keeping with the breakthrough tradition of paperback originals.

Rucker — whose square name is Rudolf von Bitter Rucker, and who ought to have had the good sense to call himself Rudi Rucker or perhaps even Rudolf von Bitter* — is educated, trained, talented and crazed in the right way.

F&SF readers will recognize "The Man Who Ate Himself" and "Inertia" from these pages. There are nineteen stories in all, some of them called things like "The Jack Kerouac Disembodied School of Poetics" and "The Indian Rope Trick Explained." Some have apparently seen no previous commercial publication; most of those are fictionalized mathematical propositions on the model of Abbot's *Flatland*; this makes sense because Rucker bills

**"Rudy Rucker" sounds like he wears cut-off T-shirts, for God's sake. Trivia fans will also note that E.R. Eddison's middle name was Rucker; that's in addition to R. Rucker's descent from Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (Ger. philos., 1770-1831).*

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himself as a "mathematical philosopher," whatever that is.

He reads, most of all, like the sort of writer Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges would read for pleasure (and with occasional flashes of envy). If an oily-boots image has deterred you thus far, I particularly urge this book upon you. Mostly, though, I don't think you can know where modern commercial SF writing has gotten to if you don't know about Rucker. (I picture him as one of those mad sprigs of Prussian nobility who used to turn up in places like Borneo rubber plantations, teaching Bach to Dyak headhunters on Sundays. Well, I've got to picture him as *something*, right, now that I've decided he doesn't carry packs of Luckies stuffed into his socks?)

Tea With the Black Dragon is a first novel by R.A. MacAvoy, about whom Bantam tells us nothing. We may draw our own conclusions from the fact that the laudatory cover blurbs are by Anne McCaffrey, Elizabeth A. Lynn, and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, than whom it would be difficult to have three better godmothers. MacAvoy, for once, is writer enough to justify their encomia.

It's a book of considerable charm. Set in contemporary San Francisco and nominally a detection puzzle about finding the lost daughter who got in over her head on a computer scam, it reminds me strongly of the sort of writing we used to see in 1930s magazines like *Argosy*. The searching mother has a chance encounter with a mysterious gentleman named Mayland Long. Long is of cultivated tastes and very large hands; the sort of fellow who used to finally thwart Fu Manchu in the last chapter. The mother, Martha Macnamara, is a concert violinist playing gigs for a living.

Both of them are in their fifties — their apparent fifties — and in the course of tracing the lost girl's odyssey into the half-world of juggled memory banks and white collar defalcation, they do something people their age didn't do in the 1930s. They don't stop short at developing a high regard for each other's nobility and sometimes considerable courage and resistance to pain; they bloody well fall in love and plan to consummate it at first opportunity. When the girl proves to be quite a shallow creature, the reader has no problem being perfectly satisfied with either or both of these matured personalities to root for.

The gimmick is that Long is somewhat more mature; he's a millennially long-lived dragon who has worked out ways of displaying human form.

All of this is written up in far more than competent prose and scene-blocking. The singular charm of the book — this sense that MacAvoy is probably a dedicated fan of John Collier and Lord Dunsany — has a tendency to give the same feeling one gets from reading Avram Davidson (although MacAvoy does not display the same sheer in-

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toxication with words.) It's not a major novel, but at a time when the domain of fantasy is so dedicatedly devoted to swashbuckling and/or sometimes egregiously high fantasy, *Tea With the Black Dragon* leaves a clean taste.

Zoë Fairbairns' *Benefits* comes to us as the American edition of a novel the London Sunday Observer called "A Chilling Orwellian Vision" and Fay Weldon characterized as "Full of Wonder ... A Female H.G. Wells." (What Mr. Wells' sex had to do with his talent, Ms. Weldon saieth not.) The London Sunday Times calls it "A successful and upsetting novel," which is nearer the mark. I'm not sure it's successful; upsetting it is. Orwell or Wells, it's nothing like. Try Thomas M. Disch.

It's Ms. Fairbairns' third novel; she's a playwright, essayist, poet and teacher and lives in London, where *Benefits* begins in the near future. Step by remorseless step, it depicts the bureaucracy's persecution and eventual total denigration of women, a ruthless and mindless process of cultural inertia that culminates in a monstrous perversion of woman's reproductive function.

Written with the sort of scrupulous attention to detail that can overwhelm your discriminatory powers if you stay with it long enough, this is an it-ran-down book of such unflagging pessimism that for several days afterward my first thought each morning was to thank God for not having made me a woman.

However, second thoughts do intrude; some of them began intruding while I was still in the text. If perverting childbirth is the climactic monstrosity, for instance, then isn't this feminist novel deliberately so structured as to place her reproductive functions at the heart of woman's identity? Isn't that counter to what the book is saying elsewhere?

And how does its realistic tone —its relentlessly verisimilitudinous detailing — comport with the totally unrealistic behavior of the children in a key sequence? I can pretty well guarantee you there are no such children this side of Walt Disney and Mary Poppins. What Fairbairns expects us to believe is that *every* child in England, without noted exception, willingly cooperates with its mother in a scheme that involves deliberately abandoning the children for a stretch of several hours and having all, each, every one of the kids, without noted exception, sweetly refuse to give the authorities his or her name and address.

As Damon Knight used to say: "Oh, *really?*" My point being that in a romantic novel, this would be O.K., but not in what this book claims to be. And there was in the end only one, count it, one flame gun? When so many of them were made and distributed? Yet the top man in government couldn't recognize it on sight? Oh, really?

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No, Fairbairns isn't yet in Wells' league as a storyteller, nor in Orwell's when it comes to plumbing the depths of man's inhumanity. However, few of us are, and Fairbairns hasn't run her course yet. What she does do in this book is sufficiently impressive to merit reading by anyone who takes SF seriously. If it's less impeccably put together than a Star Trek novel is put together, I do think there are times when a piece of work is nobler for what it attempts than the usual run of facile drek.

Millennium is John Varley's novelization of his pseudonymous IASFM short story, "Air Raid" (by "Herb Boehm"). It's a tie-in with a movie-in-progress which, at last report, was struggling through yet another screenplay draft. So this novel may prove to be substantially different from whatever film eventually appears. It might as well be looked at as a freestanding artifact.

It's a time-travel yarn, and a rattling good one, too, as they say, its chapter headings being quotes of well-known and obscure time travel story titles. So it's solidly down the genre pipeline, both in the intricacy of its paradox-flirting and in all sorts of other signatures that flaunt the mixture as before.

It's also, however, informed by Varley's mordant view of humankind's essential dignity, which is that the closest we come to possessing such a thing is the (comical) idea that there is such a thing. And so it takes on a certain driving conviction that elevates it above the level of being just another well-written adventure story. If that's what you expect from Varley, that will seem unremarkable. It's what I expect from Varley, all right, but not with this degree of clean tenacity. This book starts here and goes to there in one glittering string of movement.

It's not perfect; it ends in what I hope is an intrusion of movie logic on what is otherwise a novel. But that's tacked-on; wherever it comes from, not only can you ignore it but a few days after reading it you'll have almost entirely forgotten it's there, so much at odds with Varley's novel is it.

The premise of the situation is that in the very far future the remnants of dying humankind will begin traveling through time (and space) in order to kidnap/rescue the victims of catastrophic accidents. Let us say two commercial airliners are about to collide over the Grand Canyon. What you do is you enter the planes just before they hit, seize the people and hastily stuff 'em up the hyperspatial tube into their future, and substitute some realistically re-engineered corpses you have multimillennial stockpiles of. The planes crash, the "victims" are found, and no one's the wiser that they actually survive, in storage, somewhere unimaginably far ahead.

The idea is that the time-traveling civilization doesn't have a chance. Its

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genetic material is too attenuated, its environment is so murderously contaminated, that everyone — including the viewpoint snatch-crew female boss — has to wear a cosmetic "skin-suit" in order to pass for human. (When she's in the 20th century, she also has to chain-smoke and take other extraordinary measures to keep from gagging on the clean air.) However, just as the time-traveling culture reaches the end of the road, it can take the stored rescuees and, in one last outburst of the time-traveling method, fire them up past the trouble, to the unimaginably far future when the Earth has cleansed itself again. There, in a universe far too lethally unpolluted for the time-travelers, it will be as if humankind has found a new world and a new dawn.

O.K. Superimposed on this is all sorts of nitty-gritty detail. The hero is a tiring, drunken aviation-accident investigator who falls in love with the heroine as she's trying desperately to clean up some left-behind time-travel clues. Their paths criss-cross through a good variety of paradoxical loops, and meanwhile the sheer propulsive power of Varley's work is hurtling everything onward. Until we get to the very end, of course, but the book suffers no appreciable harm once one forgets that last few pages.

Here's a book you ought to look at if you're a tough-spy fan: *Skyripper* by David Drake, author of *Hammer's Slammers* and *The Dragon Lord* of previous years, when they were very nice combat SF and Arthurian combat fantasy, respectively. *Skyripper* is a very nicely headlong foreign intrigue story in which the Maguffin is a Soviet scientist convinced there are aliens on Earth and they're out to get him. The book goes along nicely with the premise that this is a nutty idea. On the last page, it turns out not to be, which makes this a truly lame SF novel, but an O.K. member of that peculiar twilight genre created by suspense novelists flirting with speculation.

An SF book of uncommon speculative dimensions is Robert Wilfred Franson's *The Shadow of The Ship*. The premise is that hyperspace can be perceived as an actual terrain, and that daring voyagers can traverse it in what amount to wagon trains; a nifty idea with all sorts of extrapolative possibilities.

Unfortunately, the author is a poet — a rather good one, I think — and this has affected his prose technique badly. He will *not* get to the point, he will not *make* a point the first dozen times the opportunity offers, and he writes consistently for people who have swallowed a thesaurus or would like to. I have not within memory read a story with a scenario so fascinating and a prose so opaque. Truth to tell, I haven't read it yet, having gone down spurlos versenkt at the end of Chapter Two. But I think if you have attitudes other than mine, you might get a lot of enjoyment out of this book.

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One of the most popular first stories we've published in recent years was P. E. Cunningham's "Healer," (July 1982). This entertaining new novelet shares the first story's background, the planet of New Eden and its telepathic, dragon-like natives known as pteros.

To Slay the Dragon

BY

P. E. CUNNINGHAM

He was dying. He knew that now beyond question. The poison, as well as loss of blood from the awful wound in his side, had so weakened him that he could barely stand, let alone travel. And even if he could, he thought, where could he go? The antitoxin was at the settlement, miles away. It might as well be on another world.

He forced his eyes open. The dragon was still there.

No ... no, not a dragon. The poison was making him giddy. The great golden beast beside him was not the dragon of his youthful dreams; it was an alien species, intelligent as a human, if he could believe what Foster said. They and their Terran-descended partners ruled this world, the Nest.

Pteranodon ... ptero. That's what they were called.

The ptero cocked a gold eye toward him. "Help me," the man gasped. "I'm poisoned. The settlement ... serum. ..." The ptero whined, but did not move. Foster said they understood the language. Why didn't the damned beast go for help?

"Serves me right," he muttered, "trusting a dragon. ..." He set his teeth and tried to rise. A wave of dizziness crashed against him and swept him into unconsciousness.

Victor Toshiro's boyhood was a time for dreams. His days he passed at the swimming pool and the baseball diamond, but his nights were spent with Tom Swift and Tarzan, John Carter of Mars and Conan of Cimmeria. He dreamed of piloting starships to unknown worlds, of destroying slavering alien monsters with his enchanted sword. After all, was he not of the blood of Samurai warriors? The fact

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that the last eight generations of Toshiros had come from Chicago did nothing to blunt his fantasies. *He* knew he was destined for great things.

Victor knew exactly what he wanted to do when he grew up. He wanted to slay dragons.

In junior high Victor discovered fencing, and soon became proficient with the foil. Likewise he mastered pistol shooting, archery, and various forms of the martial arts. Combat, armed and unarmed, came as naturally to him as breathing. Nor did he neglect his academic studies; his marks were among the highest in his class. Always he pushed himself toward perfection. A hero could do nothing less.

After graduation he looked about himself. Earth was civilized, long tamed, with no dragons left for him to slay. Ah, but in space—! The Terran Service needed special men and women for positions on the colony worlds. Victor intended to be one of those men. With a quick, clean parting from his family and without a glance behind him, he enlisted.

The service was overjoyed to take him. With his academic background and knowledge of weaponry, Victor was assured of work on any world he chose. The dream loomed close, at last within his grasp.

He spent his last night as a civilian in a Chicago bar with some friends. "To dragons!" he cried, his glass raised high. "May their evil find its end on the tip of my sword!"

The next morning, hung over but elated, he left Chicago for basic training. Three months later he left the Earth forever.

The man stirred to wakefulness, moaning. The ptero whined, a sad and helpless sound. "Still here?" he said to it. "Ah."

He tried to move again. His limbs felt numb and distant, no longer part of him. They would not support him. He tried to flex his fingers. Even that was difficult, like lifting lead. The poison.

"Dragons," he whispered. "I was going to slay the evil dragons that threatened the universe. I should have known. There are no dragons, and no dragonslayers. Only men like me."

The service was pleased with the young recruit they selected as a field agent. Pleased, but not quite satisfied. To serve on Terra's distant worlds, Victor would have to be more than merely satisfactory. They trained him in all forms of attack and defense, those which had evolved on the colony planets as well as those imported from Earth. Victor threw himself into his training with relish. He was confident of his own abilities, and of his special destiny. It would not be long, he was certain, before the service gave him his first dragon to slay.

It was not a dragon, but a man, on the cold, bare rock of a mining world. This, too, he accomplished with relish.

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"I wanted to be a hero," he said flatly into the dirt. "Ha! Samurai Vic, the Galactic Hit Man. Killed his first man at age nineteen. Why? For a dream that didn't exist. For adventure. For glory." His hand constricted around a fistful of dirt. He watched it dribble out between his fingers. "A hero."

The ptero bent low over him and brushed the side of its beak against his cheek. Startled, the man lifted his face from the dirt and stared into its golden eyes. The ptero touched him again. With painful effort he raised his hand and fingered its beak in return. The ptero murmured softly at his clumsy caress. Slowly the dying man smiled.

Ah, Toshiro. Come in."

Victor sauntered into the office and carelessly sprawled in the plush chair the man behind the desk indicated. His expression was studiously bland, only his black eyes alive. Those eyes swept the office automatically, noting the smallest details. The furnishings were oversized and lavish, draped in covers with a new-penny shine, perhaps a shade too ornamental. That included the man behind the oaken desk: slender of face and lips and body, dressed in the garish jacket and trousers that passed for a suit among the higher-ups these days. He frowned at Victor's careless posture. Victor noted the frown and deliberately draped one leg over the arm of his chair, allowing a smile to curve his narrow lips as the slender man slowly reddened with anger.

The man was an aide, of course. The administrators never conducted these meetings personally, as if by refusing to meet with the people of Victor's profession they could pretend trained assassins, and the need for trained assassins, did not exist. But the aides still had to deal with them, and this one, secure in his throne-high, tallbacked chair and shielded by the desk, was not above displaying his contempt for the professional killer sent to him. Victor still wore his travel gear: dark, aged pants and jacket flung over a faded woolen shirt. He had trimmed his jet hair for the occasion, but kept his thick moustache. The long dagger that had become his trademark hung from his leather belt. The aide's eyes flickered to the dagger; he let disgust remain in them long enough for Victor to notice before he fit the official smile to his face and the official civility to his voice.

"Glad we could get hold of you, Toshiro. Heard about that manhunt on Cygnus II. A quick, neat job. As always."

"Yes," Victor agreed. His eyes were slivers of black glass. "Quite neat. He bled very little, as I recall."

The official smile nearly slipped; the aide tightened it with a visible effort that brought a silent snicker from Victor. "I hope you don't mind that we pulled you off R and R," the aide said,

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"but something sticky's come up."

"Too sticky for regular security?"

"It wouldn't be, normally, but in this case ... it's a defection on New Eden. Ever heard of it?"

The name meant nothing to him. "It's a colony, isn't it? I'm afraid I've forgotten the details. They all tend to blur after awhile."

The aide sniffed. His smile was ice-thin as he savagely tapped a folder on his desk. Here, apparently, was something he hated even more than assassins. "This one's not that easy to forget. Been nothing but trouble since the day we rediscovered it." He flipped the folder open. "New Eden, second planet of the star BN-192, also known as the Nest. Originally colonized over one hundred years ago by a group of religious fanatics called the Chosen. The colony contracted an indiginous disease known as the Fever, which wiped out most of the colonists and chemically altered the survivors — in effect, completely adapting them to their new world. Some of them have started to develop esper talents as a result of mutation triggered by the Fever. They've also formed a symbiotic partnership with New Eden's dominant species, a type of reptile called a ptero. In addition to the Chosen and pteros, there's an Earth-human settlement there, as well as a research team. One of the researchers, Dr. John Morgon, apparently decided he was tired of working for Earth. He's offered his knowledge to the Chosen in return for their protection."

"Good for him." Victor slid his dagger from its sheath and began to toy with it. "Leave him where he is, I say. Or is he that important to the service?"

"He deserted his position and his oath to Terra. He knows things we don't want the Chosen to learn just yet. We want him, ah, removed."

Victor spun the knife between his fingers. He did not look at the aide. "You mean murdered."

The aide scowled at such bluntness and retreated further into his chair. "His defection is an embarrassment. We want him off New Eden. How you handle it is up to you. If you object to the mission—"

Victor tossed the knife from one hand to the other, "I object," he said, "to being called away from vacation just to clean up your mistakes. Why can't the authorities on this 'New Eden' handle it?"

"Because the only weapons they have there are guns, and guns aren't allowed beyond the settlement's borders. The pteros won't permit it."

The knife slapped to a stop in Victor's right hand. His eyes widened imperceptibly. "The pteros? The *reptiles* won't permit it?"

The aide looked as if he wanted to spit. Victor couldn't decide what his disgust was aimed at, him or the aforementioned pteros. Probably both. "That's what makes dealings with New Eden so sticky. The pteros are intelligent — on a par with man. They're also telepathic, but only between

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themselves and the Chosen. You're not acclimated to the planet, so your mind is 'closed,' to use their terminology. You won't be able to hear them. By the same token, they can't hear you. That doesn't mean they're stupid, as you'll do well to remember."

"And that's why I was chosen? Because your men are afraid of talking snakes?"

"Don't get cute, Toshiro. The weapons ban only rules out guns. The pteros *will* allow native weapons — knives, spears, and bow and arrow. You're expert at all three, so they tell me. If it becomes necessary to subdue Morgon—"

"Or kill him."

"—you shouldn't have any problems. It might be more difficult to get him out of there if he's gone over, but someone of your reputed caliber should be able to—"

Victor arched an eyebrow. "Gone over?"

"Become acclimated. Taken the Fever. Colonists are given that option when they go to New Eden: remain in the Terran section, or risk the Fever and join the Chosen. Have you ever been tested for ESP?"

The question threw him, but he landed on his feet. "Once, when I joined the service. I've forgotten my rating. It's been a long time."

"You'll be tested again before you go, and given a series of preventive shots. You'll get a booster upon arrival."

"All that?" Victor rubbed his thumb on the dagger's worn hilt. "Your concern for my welfare is touching."

"You wouldn't crack so wise if you knew the facts. Eight out of ten die from the Fever. The others become acclimated and are stuck on the planet for the rest of their lives. Survival is linked to esper ratings. The higher your rating, the better your chances of coming out of it alive."

"And we wouldn't want to risk that, would we?" Victor said, balancing his knife on the tip of a finger. "Wouldn't want your prime cleanup man to die, or get himself trapped on some backwater world. ..."

The aide leaned forward, hands gripping the arms of his chair. "This isn't some game, Toshiro, like you usually try to make it. When you leave here, you'll go straight to med for testing and shots. Your ship is scheduled to leave in forty-eight hours. If you want to skip the vaccinations and dig yourself a nice deep grave, go right ahead. Everyone in the service is expendable. Even you, Samurai Vic."

Victor smiled. His eyes were thin black lines. He dropped the dagger into his palm and snapped his wrist. The blade flashed into the padding of the tallbacked chair, not half an inch from the aide's ear. The man's eyes fixed on the quivering knife, bulging like a toad's.

Leisurely, Victor rose, leaned across the desk, and plucked the knife

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from the padding. "Well, since you put it to me so nicely, I'll go. One's duty to the service and all that. But next time, try not to disturb my vacation with nuisance tasks." He fingered the gash in the padding and tsked. "What a pity. I've damaged your lovely chair." Slipping the dagger into its sheath, Victor strolled out of the office.

On the way to med he reflected, briefly, on his behavior. The aide was snide and stuffed with self-importance, like all his breed, but Victor had dealt with aides before and never lost his temper. *Perhaps I'm getting edgy,* he thought with a grin, *or maybe just getting old.*

Or perhaps getting tired of dragons.

His fingers fell away from the ptero's beak. He shuddered from a sudden, inexplicable chill. The ptero lay down beside him and blanketed him with its wing. Its musky warmth stilled his shivering, if only for the moment.

"Soon now, my dragon," he whispered. "Very soon."

They gave him a folder of last-minute details to study on the ship. Morgon's picture and description. A picture of Dr. Calvin Foster, Victor's contact in the settlement. A briefing on the Chosen, their culture, lives, and the strange psi talents they were said to possess. A capsule study of New Eden's wildlife. Taboos he should be wary of, places to avoid. He skimmed the sheets at the start of the trip and spent the rest of the flight asleep in his seat. Just before he entered the shuttle that would take him from ship to planet, he slid the papers down the disposal chute.

New Eden was not too different physically from Earth's other Terra-type colonies. Gravity was a few points lighted than Earth's, the climate at the settlement site roughly equivalent to the Terran tropic zone. Difference in planetary biochemistry made the food inedible and the atmosphere acerbic, though breathable. The settlement compensated with synthesizers, and one eventually got used to the air's sour taste. In all, it might have lived up to its optimistic name and become a true paradise for Terrans — if not for the existence of the Fever, or the presence of a native intelligent race already in control of the planet.

Which made no difference, Victor thought with a mental shrug. It was still a colony. These worlds were the same, the missions the same, the stink of blood always the same. No matter what the aide had said, he foresaw more sameness in New Eden.

The shuttle that ferried him down was a supply craft, carrying goods to the settlement. New Eden exported little; its importance — the homeworld of the only alien race so far contacted by Earth — was scientific rather than economic. Victor ignored the growing view of the planet in the shuttle's screens, as well as the pilot's unending

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stream of cheerful, innocuous patter. With expert skill the pilot brought the craft down on the landing field just outside the settlement, without a bump or audible pause for breath. Victor silently commended him for his coordination.

"C'mon, sir," the pilot said, tugging at Victor's sleeve. "I've got friends in the settlement. I'll introduce you around, help you get settled in. The first couple weeks in a colony can be rough. It helps to—"

"Thank you," Victor fluidly disengaged his arm from the pilot's grip as he shouldered his travel bag and aimed for the hatch. "I won't be staying any 'couple weeks.' I doubt if—"

He froze on the landing ramp, transfixed.

Standing before him was a dragon.

It crouched upon two delicate legs, four-toed and clawed like a lizard's. A hammer-shaped head weaved back and forth far above his own. Muscles rippled beneath a raw-gold hide as it shifted ribbed leather wings to maintain its balance. Its tail shushed back and forth behind it, the fleshy triangle tip flicking like a leaf in a breeze. It whistled a low greeting to the shuttle, or perhaps to him.

He could barely breathe, so staggering was its presence. "Magnificent!" he whispered.

"Major?" A man in Terran field clothes bounded up the ramp. His hair was thick as snowfall, his lean face weather-tanned. "Major Toshiro? I'm Dr. Foster; they told me to expect you. I realize Central probably didn't prepare you for this. ..." He waved his hand toward the dragon. "The Chosen are allowed to supervise shuttle landings. It's part of the peace agreement."

"Chosen?" Victor tore his eyes from the golden reptile's and noticed for the first time the three others of its kind squatting behind it at the edge of the landing field. Their smooth hides shimmered in the sun: gray, blue-green, and brown. Men stood stiffly at their sides: bearded, coarse-haired, rope-muscled, clad in leathers and shirts of dyed cloth. One gripped a spear; all wore knives. Their impassive faces were turned to Victor. There was little trust in their eyes.

Victor nodded vaguely. "Of course. The Chosen." His gaze drifted back to meet the dragon's. Its unblinkingly eyes regarded him in turn, gleaming with keen intelligence. Deep, rippling chortles trilled out of its beak. Was it laughing at him?

Foster chuckled. "Don't let Gonal's size upset you. The average ptero doesn't get this big. He and his party are here to welcome you to the Nest. They were curious to see what Earth's sent us this time."

"*His* party?" Some of the aide's lecture filtered up from the depths of Victor's memory. "Ah, yes. These animals are supposed to be—"

A fierce shriek erupted from one of the other three pteros, the brown. She followed it with a low, scathing hiss.

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The roundfaced man beside her blanched. "Vassi! What a thing to say! Apologize at once!"

Still hissing, the brown sank her head between her shoulders and shut her eyes — and ears — against her rider's outrage. The man scurried to the shuttle; he stopped and fidgeted at the base of the ramp. "Sir, I apologize for my partner's rudeness. I realize you must have spoken in ignorance, but Vassi often lets her tongue get ahead of her brain. ..."

"I don't understand."

"Major Toshiro isn't a colonist, Enos," Foster explained to the Chosen man. "He hasn't taken the Fever. He can't hear Vassi, or Gonal, or any of them."

"He can't?" Enos's shuffling stopped. He peered up the ramp at the Terran; Victor saw pity in his eyes. "I see. Well then, it doesn't matter — to you. *She*, on the other hand, is going to get her tail kicked."

The brown opened one eye, glowered at her rider, and snorted. Victor let Foster escort him down the ramp. "For curiosity's sake," he asked, "what exactly did she say?"

Enos gulped. "Well, she — it had to do with your ancestors and mating with rhams. I doubt very much you'd want to hear it."

"Rhams?" The word had a fleetingly familiar taste to it. It must have been in that report he'd skimmed. "What's a rham?"

Gonal stared down at him with a steamy whistle of astonishment. Vassi hooted. "My God, didn't Central tell you anything?" Foster said. "A rhamphorynchus. A native reptile, sort of a bastard cousin to a ptero, but smaller and stupid — not to mention poisonous. Vicious buggers. They'll jump anything that moves." He shook his head in Vassi's direction. "Considering how pteros feel about rhams, that must have been some insult."

Vassi grated something nasty. Gonal barked at her. She ignored him. The other pteros chittered among themselves. Their riders' faces were carefully blank, but Victor's keen eyes detected the twitch of smirking lips inside their beards. "She understands what I say?"

"They all do, Major, so watch yourself."

"I always do." Victor left the safety of Foster's side and strode across the landing site to Vassi. She slitted searing eyes at him as he approached. He stopped before her and bowed. "Forgive me for my error, madam, I'll know better in the future. I'm certain my stay on your lovely world will be much more pleasant than your presence has made it so far."

It took her a minute to puzzle out the insult; by then Victor was well out of reach. Gonal guffawed loudly at her fury. With his laugh the ice was broken, and soon Victor was chatting easily with the Chosen representatives.

Until Enos asked him, "If you're not a colonist or scientist, why are you here?"

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Victor gauged the Chosen's suddenly alert expressions, and decided on a sliver of truth. "I was sent by Terran Security. I'm looking for John Morgon."

All talk ceased at the same instant. The boiling scent of tension, well known to Victor, crept into the atmosphere. Vassi's hiss sliced the air like a knife. The spear-bearer stepped in front of Victor, his blue-green ptero behind him, its head snaked low. The man's voice was as stony and sharp as his spearpoint. "Why?"

"He's broken Terran law by defecting. Our government wants him back. I demand that he be turned over to me at once."

"You're in no position to demand anything, Terran," the Chosen snarled. "Don't think you can—"

"Benedict, please." The third Chosen man slid smoothly between the spear-bearer and Victor. His gray partner rumbled anxiously. "Major Toshiro, I'm sorry. John Morgon came to us of his own will and asked for sanctuary. He wants no more contact with his own kind. It's been agreed between our council and your authorities" — he nodded toward Foster — "to let him stay where he is."

"Oh?" Victor flung over his shoulder at Foster. "You've spoken to Morgon?"

"No," Foster admitted, "he'd already reached the cliffs. There wasn't anything we could do. I don't have the authority to—"

"I do." His eyes had never left the spear-bearer's. "Terran Security gave me the power—"

"Terra doesn't rule here, deafmind," Benedict rasped. "The pteros and we take no orders from you. John Morgon will stay where he is. Tell that to your council and your Nest!"

Benedict's grip on his spearshaft tightened. Victor's hand hovered over the hilt of his dagger. The blue-green ptero at Benedict's side snapped open its beak, but it was Vassi's scream, shrill and scathing, that shattered the tableau. Benedict half-turned to face her; an electric tingle prickled at the edges of Victor's consciousness, like the muffled sounds of a conversation half-heard through a thick, bolted door. Then it must be true, what the aide had said, that the Chosen and pteros were telepathic with each other, but with no one else. He would gladly have given his ample pay to know what they were saying.

Whatever it was, Benedict did not like it. His face reddened with rage. "No!" he thundered at her. "We dare not—"

Vassi dropped her head to the level of his eyes and rumbled something smooth. Gonal snapped a series of angry barks. Vassi glanced up at him; her purr turned oily. The Chosen stood by, listening, waiting. At length Gonal hesitated. He gazed down from his impressive height at Victor; a slow, defeated hiss leaked through his beak.

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Tail undulating in triumph, Vassi nodded permission to Benedict. The man glared hotly at the Terrans as he spoke; he spat the words out quickly, anxious to be rid of them. "We will speak to the council. We *may* be able to arrange for your man to visit Morgon. We promise nothing."

Spear in hand, Benedict vaulted onto his ptero's back. The pair leaped skyward with a violent crack of wings. Gonal growled at the pit of his throat. Vassi's eyes were smug.

The third Chosen mumbled something to Enos, sketched an apologetic bow to Foster, and left astride his gray. Enos also bowed to Foster. "I'm sorry about all this," he said. "We had no idea your Nest would insist. ... This will mean a special meeting of council. It could take some time. I'll let you know the minute they reach a decision."

Foster expressed appropriate thanks. Enos, with a friendly nod to Victor, leaped aboard Vassi. She also flicked a glance at Victor; until that moment he would have sworn no creature with a beak could sneer. Gonal's snarl prodded her into a hasty takeoff. Once they were away Gonal flexed his own wings. Before he rose he curved his neck toward the Terrans in a farewell bow. His wings swirled the air like a hurricane as he leaped and soared to the south, the direction of the Chosen's hidden caves.

Only then did Victor realize an important fact. "That ptero — Gonal. Where is his rider?"

"Gonal? He's a solo — an unattached ptero. He doesn't have a rider. If you'll follow me, Major, I'll show you to your quarters." Foster plucked up Victor's travel bag and offered a rueful grin. "Sorry about the 'welcome.' "

"I've had worse." And few as interesting. He fell in behind Foster, his thoughts crackling with unaccustomed excitement. The Chosen offered a challenge, something lacking in his missions of late. This was one dragon he would well enjoy stalking before he moved in for the kill.

Victor's quarters were standard for prefab housing: small, square, sterile. Foster had done his best to give the place a touch of home. The narrow cot and plasform chairs were standard issue, but woven native rugs brightened the walls and floor, and a chest of drawers carved from New Eden wood sat placidly in a corner. The smell of the native timber left an oily taste in Victor's nostrils. He shut his senses against it and dumped his travel bag on the cot. Shrugging out of his jacket, he stripped off his woolen shirt and replaced it with a lighter, shortsleeved garment more in keeping with New Eden's muggy climate. He took from the travel bag a lighter jacket as well, one of pale service green bearing his insignia. As a final, almost ritual act Victor strapped on his worn leather belt

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and slid his dagger easily into its sheath. He had no gun, had not even brought one. A hero slew dragons, and more often men, best with naked steel.

Someone rapped on the door. At Victor's invitation Foster entered, holding a hypo case. "Booster shot," he explained. "You *were* vaccinated before you came, weren't you?"

Victor grimaced at the memory. "Several times." He held his arm out stiffly and endured the prick of the needle. Foster nodded toward the knife in Victor's belt. "Gone native already, eh?"

"Of course not. I ... heard the Chosen were knife-wielders. I thought it might give me an edge."

"As long as you don't pack a gun. The pteros are pretty leary about guns."

Victor sniffed. "Animals."

"Animals? Maybe so. Maybe not." Foster tucked the empty hypo back into the case. "Wonder why they're after Morgon? We've had a few defections before — hell, every colony does. Central never bothered about *them*. What makes Morgon special?"

"I wouldn't know. What they don't tell me isn't my business. Did he tell you why he wanted to defect?"

"Nope. Never said a word about it. Just up and left. I have no idea why."

"Senseless," Victor said. "I've been told defection on New Eden is irreversible. Why would he, or anyone, 'go over'?"

"Lots of reasons, most of 'em pretty standard. Curiosity, adventure. Sometimes there's a girl involved, or a young man. For some it's just a way out."

"A way out of what?"

Foster rubbed his lower lip. "There you've got me. I think ... sometimes people running from something, or unhappy about something, think they'll find the answer on a different world. I guess it's the desperate ones who come to New Eden, since here defection's a one-way street. Haven't you ever thought about it? Skipping out and leaving the service behind?"

"Never," Victor snapped. His voice turned wary. "Have you?"

"At times. The pteros are a fascinating species. I wish I could hear them and talk to them ... but I can't. My esper rating's 'way too low. I'd never survive the Fever. Which is why I can't figure why Morgon would pick New Eden for his defection. His esper rating was nil. There's no way he could take the Fever and become one of the Chosen." Foster's mouth twitched in a kind of shrug. "I wish I knew what his reasons were. He didn't look like a defector; they're usually easy to spot. You can see it in their faces, how they feel defection's their last resort. Either that, or death."

"Yes." Victor caressed his dagger sheath. "Or death."

Night on New Eden came abruptly, after a lingering sunset. After full dark Victor slipped out of his cramped quar-

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ters. The sterile room was too confining; he needed space to think. He left the building unseen and moved with the bold, unhurried stride of a warrior through the Terran town.

The settlement was a strange amalgamation of the modern and the primitive, of native-wood houses laboriously constructed by the original Chosen colonists squatting beside the prefab plastic living quarters preferred by the current inhabitants. The unpaved, dusty main street was illuminated solely by the bright rose light of New Eden's small red moon and the firefly winking of stars. The few people abroad were Terran Security. They squinted at Victor's service jacket and let him pass uncontested. In the shadows insects tweaked and chirruped, falling to stone-stillness as he approached, resuming their music as he passed. The air was soggy and clinging; he seemed to wade through it, rather than walk. It had an acid, bitter scent. New Eden's chemical differences, of course. How did the air smell, he wondered, to the acclimated Chosen? How did it smell to the dragon?

The sky overhead went suddenly black as the huge bulk of a ptero blocked the moonlight. Victor's hand instinctively flashed to his knife. The reptile swept by with an effortless stroke of its wings and touched down on the landing field. Hesitantly, still touching his weapon, Victor approached it. The ptero silently watched him draw near; it dipped its anvil head in a bow of greeting. Copper highlights rippled across its body as it moved, soft red light on a golden hide. Gonal.

Less than ten paces from the ptero, Victor stopped. Narrow black eyes met eyes of gold. "When I was a boy," he whispered, "how I dreamed of you. My magic sword and I against a dragon." His hand closed on his knife. "And here you are."

Gonal chittered. Victor snapped the dagger into his hand; the metal caught the moonlight and turned it to blood. The ptero cocked his head and eyed the blade. Victor snorted a laugh. "Not much of a sword, is it? That's just as well. I'm not a boy anymore." He returned the knife to its sheath. "And I have no more dreams."

The golden reptile barked an inquiry. "Don't you know who I am? Let me enlighten you." He bowed low. "Major Victor Toshiro of the Terran Service — Samurai Vic to my enemies. Weapons master, troubleshooter, and slayer of dragons, at your service. Heoric deeds a specialty. What would you like? A kingdom saved? A fair maiden rescued? A man murdered?"

Gonal hissed and scythed his tail across the short, seared grass. "Murder, yes. They can call it what they like. They say I'm a hero, you know. I used to believe it. I believed *in* it. These days ... I've learned better. There are no heroes. You're a pteranodon. And I...."

The ptero hissed again, but it was

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not a hostile sound. "Yes," Victor agreed. "I know what I am. But there are dreams. There must be dreams." He reached out; his hand and voice trembled. "Let me touch you, my almost dragon. Prove to me that much is real."

He stepped closer. Gonal bent his head. Victor reached toward the ptero's serpentine neck. His fingertips brushed a hide smooth as a woman's skin, dry and unexpectedly warm. Emboldened, transfixed, he edged closer. ...

A man's voice called Victor's name. Gonel slewed his head around and whistled. Startled, Victor leaped back, hand on dagger hilt. Foster stood at the edge of the landing field, behind him the silhouettes of a man and a ptero. The reptile's scalding, sarcastic hiss revealed her as Vassi. Gonal thundered in response, his wings snapping open to their full impressive spread. Vassi fell silent, her eyes aflame. The man at her side leaned toward Foster, mouthed something Victor couldn't catch, and swung himself hurriedly onto Vassi's back. The pteros lifted off as one, their wings stirring a whirlwind of dust. Vassi shot straightaway to the south, but Gonal hovered and whistled a low good-night. Before the echoes died both pteros were only specks above the trees.

"Major?" Foster called. "That was Enos. The council's decided to let you see Morgon tomorrow morning. One of our people will take you in by airskimmer."

Victor stared out over the trees. His arms hung at his sides, fists clenched. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. You weren't in your room when we went to tell you. Vassi said you were out here with Gonal, so we—"

Victor's hand crept to his dagger, as if for comfort. "You heard?"

"Enough of it, yes." Foster approached him on cat's feet and stopped what would have been a safe distance from any man but Victor. "So you're Samurai Vic. Major Victor Toshiro. I didn't make the connection before. And Morgon ... you're here to kill him, aren't you?"

"You know what my orders are."

"I know what I was told." Foster's shiver was theatrical. "Chilly out here tonight," he said, though the air was thick with heat. "C'mon back to my office. We'll grab a cup of coffee."

The men walked together in silence for a time. Again, it was Foster who spoke first. "I was told a few other things, too. Central's asked me to, well, detain you on New Eden for a few days, after you complete your mission. I think ... I think they want you terminated."

"Did they say that?"

"They didn't have to. I know how to translate officialese. Even out here we get stories about — Samurai Vic. Insubordination. Sloppy missions. A target who almost escaped. The service tends to scrap weapons that malfunc-

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tion ... usually before they blow up in the wielder's face."

"I'm very tired," Victor said. "I've got work to do tomorrow. We'll talk when I get back."

"Aren't you even worried?"

"What can I do about it?"

"Go over. Take the Fever. The Chosen will protect you. We've got shots to counter the vaccinations. If your esper rating's high enough—"

"If I take the Fever and survive, I can never leave New Eden."

"You may not be leaving anyway."

Victor shrugged. "Why the warning?"

Foster's mouth twitched. He looked embarrassed. "Probably because of Gonal."

"Gonal? What's he got to do with it?"

"You don't know him too well yet, Major. I do. He may not be able to hear Terran minds, but he's an excellent judge of Terran character, and he's never wrong. When he took to you right off I knew you were OK. He'll sponsor you if you opt to join the Chosen. What have you got to lose?"

"My life, which I've grown fond of. That's enough for me."

Foster sighed. "Suit yourself. Just remember you've got an option." He paused, as if gathering courage, then asked, "What about Morgon?"

"That's my affair. I'll see you in the morning." He entered the building assigned him without further waste of words, not even a return of Foster's good-night. His mind was on tomorrow, when he would see Morgon, and take the course of action he had chosen.

He found himself unconsciously rubbing his knife sheath. He held up his hand and stared at his fingers, and imagined he could feel them tingle from the heat of a dragon's hide.

Like the night, day came swiftly, in a blaze of brilliant red. As promised, a ptero and Chosen were waiting on the landing field by the airskimmer, to guide Victor to the cliffs. Victor swallowed a grimace; his escort was Enos and Vassi. Enos hailed him, a guileless grin splitting his beard, and Vassi cackled a greeting. Her tone was suitably waspish.

The skimmer's pilot frisked him before he boarded. "Sorry, Major," she said. "Ban on Terran weapons. Can't be too careful." She paused, tugging her lip over Victor's dagger. "That knife O.K.?" she asked Enos.

The man glanced up at his ptero. She made a shrugging sound. "I'll take it," he said. "After the council's spoken to you, they'll probably let you have it back."

"I understand," Victor said, and dropped the knife into Enos's outstretched palm. He had hoped they would let him keep his dagger, but there was no sense in pushing his luck. The Chosen fingered the alien metal curiously before he tucked the knife in-

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to his belt. He climbed aboard Vassi, and Victor vaulted into the skimmer. "Strap in," the pilot directed, and revved the engine. Vassi snarled her loathing of the noisy, fume-spitting skimmer as she stretched her wings. Craft and ptero rose together; Vassi took the lead. *Not much longer,* Victor thought. A thin, knifelike smile slit his face.

The forest passed beneath them like green mist. At a grassy, rock-strewn clearing Vassi suddenly swerved to the east. "What's the trouble?" Victor said.

"That." The pilot pointed to the twisted spires of rock that pierced the sky in the west. "The Finger Cliffs. Rham nesting grounds. Pteros won't go near 'em. Nobody does, if they got any brains." She made a spitting motion with her lips and gunned the skimmer past the mountains at top speed.

An hour's flight brought the skimmer within sight of the Chosen's cliffs. Cave mouths dotted the sandstone walls; pteros dotted the skies. Vassi circled a break in the trees and hovered there, screeching. The pilot waved acknowledgment and dropped down to land. The airskimmer, like Terran weapons, was allowed no closer to the Chosen settlement. Victor grudgingly accepted this, as he had to accept the honor guard of spear-bearers who waited for him in the clearing. They stood stiff as carvings until the skimmer was gone; only then did their spokesman step forward. Benedict. His eyes wished Victor elsewhere. "Come with us."

Victor let himself be marched into the clearing before the cliff. There were patches of garden in the grass, and stone ovens for baking, even someone's laundry dangling limply between two drooping trees. But few people. His hand strayed of its own accord to the empty dagger sheath at his belt. Something wasn't right here; he could scent it, keen as the acid in the air. His thinned eyes flashed to the faces of the handful present. No woman or children. Only men, all with warrior's muscles, and all armed.

Off to one side crouched Vassi. Her eyes glittered like a traitor's gold.

Victor stopped, despite the prodding spearpoint at his back. "Where's Morgon?"

"We're taking you to him," Benedict said. "Keep moving."

"I want to see him out here."

Vassi tittered. "You'll see him soon enough, assassin," Benedict snarled. "We know the real reason you're here. We tolerate Terra's presence on the Nest, deafmind, but we do not tolerate spies. Now move."

Victor moved. He spun, his hand cracking against the side of Benedict's head. Wrenching the spear from the dazed man's grasp, he whirled to face—

PAIN!

Agony like claws dug into his mind. The world shattered into fragments of sandstone and grass as Victor crashed to his knees, his very thoughts scraped raw. From a universe away he

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heard Enos cry out. "Vassi, don't! The council wants him alive!"

The claws withdrew. Strong, calloused hands dragged him toward the gaping black maw of a cave. The ptero squatting on guard before it hitched aside so they could enter. Victor's captors laid him on the floor, not ungently. The dry coldness of the stone against his face revived him enough to permit coherent thought, though shivers of pain still lingered in his mind.

They knew what he was. Who had betrayed him? The Chosen sympathizer, Foster? Or Gonal?

His mouth hardened. *Never trust a dragon. ...*

He pulled himself into a sitting position, ignoring the ache in his head. The men were gone, but the ptero remained, blocking the cave mouth. It hissed at him good-naturedly, and he gave it a sour smile. "I don't suppose you can tell me what they plan to do with me?"

"He can't, but I'll be happy to," a voice behind him said. Victor sprang to his feet and dropped automatically into an attack stance. The man standing before him laughed softly and stepped into the meager light. Ill-fitting Chosen leathers covered a bony frame. The lips within the week's growth of beard were taut and cynical.

"You're looking for Morgon, right?" he said. "Well, you just found him. I'm John Morgon. I'm the Chosen's prisoner. And so are you."

* * *

The men sat together in the semi-darkness, talking. There was little else they could do. "So you're a prisoner," Victor said. "I'd been told you joined the Chosen voluntarily."

"Part of my cover." Morgon's words were breathy and harsh. "Keep your voice down. That lizard's not a telepath, but he understands Terran like a native."

Victor followed Morgon's furtive glance at their jailor. The beast seemed to be dozing. "Not a telepath? I was under the impression they were all telepathic, only they can't read Terran minds."

Morgon made a raspy sound. It could have been a laugh; Victor suspected it wasn't. "Ah, yes. The limits of ptero telepathy. That's one of the things I was sent here to study."

"Sent ...?"

"Don't be dense, you fool. I'm a Terran agent. We've seen evidence of advanced ESP powers among the Chosen and pteros for some time now. Central needs to know the extent of those powers, and whether or not they can ever be used against Earth."

"Ah." Things were growing clearer now. The service had not lied only to Foster when they sent Victor to New Eden. "Then you aren't really part of the research team?"

"Nope. Never was. My mission was to infiltrate the Chosen and observe their powers, as well as learn their intentions toward Earth. Since they couldn't read my mind, I could

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spy without being spied on. We thought."

"Learn anything useful?"

"Oh, yes. We were right about their psi powers. They have healers here who can repair broken bones — destroy cancerous tumors — do anything medical science can do, with their minds alone. There are telekinetics, one or two people who foretell the future, there's a family that can grow plants from seed to maturity in hours ... and the telepaths." He made the raspy nonlaugh again. "Let's not forget the *telepaths*."

Morgon's tone capitalized the word, made it a curse. "What about the telepaths?" Victor prompted.

"They couldn't hear a Terran's thoughts," Morgon muttered; he was speaking to the air. "We all believed it. But, there are telepaths, and there are telepaths — especially among the pteros. Picture this, friend: a ptero with a mind so strong it can kill by thought, so sensitive it can pick up Terran brain waves. They *can* hear us. Anyway, some of them can. They sure as hell heard *me*. They let me stay with them, study them. Kept me alive by trading with the base for Terran foods. Gave me enough rope to hang myself. Then, when I tried to slip away for my pickup, that bitch-lizard Vassi—"

Victor stiffened. "Vassi?"

"You know her? Well, that's no surprise. I'll bet she was part of the welcome wagon you met when you landed, right? She's probably picked your brain clean by now. Telepath!" He spat the word. "I'd've been off this slimeball days ago if she hadn't blasted me. She can burn the brain right out of your skull."

His words sparked the memory of fierce psychic claws gouging into Victor's mind. Vassi. Vassi could hear his thoughts. And uppermost in his mind from the first had been his mission, the murder of John Morgon.

Vassi. Not Foster. *Not Gonal. ...*

"In other words," Victor drawled, "the Chosen are guilty of spying, too. Only our side got caught at it first."

Morgon glowered at him. "You've got a smart mouth for a government rep. You *are* from Central, right?" Victor nodded cautiously. "Thought so. No way the Chosen could turn you down without arousing suspicion. Hope you got what you came for."

Victor did not reply to that. Instead he asked, "What happens to us now?"

"Nothing, yet. We're hostages. They'll hold us till they figure out what they're going to do. There are two factions, near as I can tell. One doesn't like Earth's presence here and wants to drive all Terrans off New Eden. That's Benedict's bunch. The other will accept us, but only on their terms. Proof of espionage would embarrass Earth and put us in a bad position, and the Chosen could call the shots. Vassi heads up that group. For Earth's sake, we can't let either side win out."

"Oh? Why not?"

" 'Why not'? You sound like that

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sympo Foster. You haven't seen what they can do. This isn't just another lost colony, where we can just drop in and pick up the pieces and recivilize the savages. The Chosen think they own this planet, and with the forces they and the pteros control...." He shuddered. "My God, a Terran assault team wouldn't stand a chance. I have to get free and warn Terra. We don't dare let the Chosen get the upper hand. They have to be stopped!"

His voice had risen; the ptero shuffled and murmured. Morgon clamped his mouth shut while he calmed himself, but the fanatical gleam did not leave his eyes. Victor recognized that fervor; it was a common fire in the eyes of young servicemen, those who wished for glory and adventure, who wished to be heroes. He studied the wall of the cave. "What do you suggest we do?"

Morgon growled. His legs twitched, as if he wanted to pace but did not dare. "I've got a subspace sender hidden in the forest. If we could get to it—"

"Fine." Victor cocked his head toward the ptero. "You want to take him on hand-to-hand, or shall I?"

"You wouldn't be so flip if you'd seen their power in action."

"I've felt it." He rubbed his still-throbbing head. "You're right; we have to get out of here. The problem is how."

The ptero in the cavemouth bestirred itself with a squawk. It hauled its bulk to one side to admit Enos. The Chosen laid a wooden tray of Terran rations on the floor beside the entrance. "It's about time," Victor said, rising. "I want to protest—"

"You're too late, Major Toshiro. Gonal and his party have already gone to see Dr. Foster, to lodge a complaint against you, Dr. Morgon, and Terra's actions against the Nest. Until it's settled, you'll remain here."

"You're going to kill us, aren't you?" Morgon said.

"That hasn't been decided." Enos dropped his eyes. "I'm sorry about this, I truly am. There are many of us, Chosen and pteros, who want to see you Terrans stay. It's a pity we couldn't trust each other."

He turned to go. The instant his back was to them Morgon leaped.

The ptero yelled a warning. Enos whirled in time to dodge Morgon's charge. The ptero's tail slammed against Morgon's side, spinning him into the wall. Enos, staggering for footing, lurched for the cavemouth.

Victor shook his head sadly. Amateurs. Before Enos reached the cavemouth Victor reached Enos, pinning his arms behind his back and dragging them both out of reach of the ptero's thrashing tail. His captive secure, Victor liberated his dagger from its place in Enos's belt. His palm welcomed it home. "Morgon?" he called. The Terran sat up groggily. "I hope you can walk. Get out of our way," he added to the screeching ptero. "We're leaving."

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The ptero peered down through half-lidded eyes, not at Victor, but at Enos. Enos nodded. The ptero hopped into the sky and vanished. Morgon, grinning crookedly and rubbing his bruised side, hauled himself to his feet. "Nice move — Toshiro, was it? C'mon. There's not much ti—"

The word ended in a shriek. Hot talons of agony raked through Victor's mind. He held himself erect by sheer will and pressed his dagger against Enos's neck. "Stop it," he hissed aloud, "or I'll slit his throat."

The pain stopped instantly. Outside the cave, Vassi screamed her helplessness. "Damn her," Morgon panted. "Damn all telepaths. Bloody—"

"She won't hurt us," Victor said. "Not while we've got this one." He prodded Enos forward. "Let's go."

The warriers of the Chosen were waiting for them, flanked by a dozen pteros. Vassi and Benedict stood in the forefront. Benedict drew back his spear, but Vassi's shrill, frantic bark stopped him. Her eyes sought Enos's; the air sizzled with their silent communication. "Go ahead," Enos said flatly to Victor when it was done. "Leave. We won't try to stop you."

"I know you won't." The edge of the dagger grazed Enos's throat, just above the artery. Step by sidelong, wary step, the strange procession moved across the clearing. "I told you we should have killed them outright," Benedict grumbled as they passed.

Vassi snapped a surly retort. She hissed at Victor. The hate in the sound was crippling.

"This way," Morgon said, steering them toward a path at the edge of the clearing that led into dark forest. The trees closed in around them almost at once, shielding them from the sight, if not the outraged sounds, of the gathered Chosen.

"I hope you know where you're going," Victor said.

"Of course I do. I told you, I've got a transmitter hidden out here. I used to make reports every few days. Told the Chosen I was doing research." He halted abruptly and gestured with his thumb at Enos. "We can't take him."

"Why not?"

"He's mentally linked to Vassi. She'll track us through him. We'll have to dump him."

The way he said it left no room for doubt. "I'll take care of it," Victor said. "Go ahead. I'll catch up in a few minutes."

Morgon nodded and vanished up the path. Victor waited until he was gone, then twisted Enos around to face him. The Chosen struggled to show no fear as Victor's knife pricked his throat.

"Tell me," Victor said; his voice was wistful. "What's it like to be loved by a dragon?"

Enos blinked and stared at him. "A what?"

"Never mind." His fist caught Enos full on the jaw. Enos crumpled to the ground. Victor nodded, satisfied. With

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the Chosen's mind closed by unconsciousness, Vassi would have no way to trail them.

"You're a lucky man, my friend," Victor said, "though I doubt you'll realize that until you wake up." He dropped his dagger into its sheath and sprinted after Morgon.

The path coiled and doubled upon itself like a nervous snake. Victor could not tell for sure how many miles they covered, but the sun was sliding into midafternoon by the time Morgon waved him to a halt. "This is it. Look for a tree with a cross carved on the trunk."

That would be no problem, for they had left the main body of the forest behind awhile ago. The trees had gradually thinned, giving way to sparse brush, rocks, and wiry grass. Dark, winged figures flitted across the sky, too high up to see clearly. "So they followed us," Morgon grated, "all the way to the Finger Cliffs. We'll have to move fast."

Victor gazed at the circling specks and absently fondled the hilt of his dagger. "I doubt if speed will make any difference. You know as well as I why they let us go. We're not adapted to the planet and can't survive out here. Our only choices are to return the Chosen, or try to reach the settlement. Either way they'll be waiting for us."

"Yeah, but it'll be too late by then. Once we find the transmitter I can radio directly to a service ship. They can yelp about spying all they like, but only after I warn Earth about their telepaths."

The dark shapes in the sky winged closer. Victor's mouth thinned. There had been no real pursuit before. Something wasn't right here. Something—

"Aha!" Morgon squatted beside a thin, raggedy pine with a cross gouged into its bark. He dug into the soft loam beneath it and pulled out a wide metal box. Inside, besides the portable transmitter, were a stack of Terran rations, a plastic weather poncho, and a Terran hardlight beamer. Victor bounced the pistol in his palm, testing its balance. "Nice piece. Pity you didn't have it on you when Vassi found you out."

"Ha! You don't know how I wished for it then. I couldn't carry it around the cliffs, of course. 'Way too risky. Here, I'll put it back."

Victor passed the gun over to him and stared up at the sky. The pteros were drawing rapidly nearer; their cries, still faint, were eager and shrill. "Maybe you'd better keep it out. We may need it."

"You'd better believe it, friend."

The cold, quiet tone of Morgon's voice made Victor turn. The beamer, set to kill, was pointing directly at him. "I'm not idiot, Toshiro," Morgon said. "They told me this was a delicate mission, and what would happen to me if I got caught. When I didn't report for pickup, they must've feared the worst. Central couldn't be sure I'd suicide, so

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there's only one reason you'd be here."

Victor eyed the beamer, unperturbed. He had expected something like this. "They're going to kill you anyway. You said so yourself."

"Maybe not. They don't know about the Chosen's telepaths. I can buy my life with that. But first I have to get you out of this."

Victor smirked. With Morgon's intentions so blatantly telegraphed, he had no trouble dodging the pistol's beam. He rolled, came up with his dagger in hand, and let it fly. The blade unerringly struck home. Morgon howled and dropped the pistol to clutch at the knife transfixing his right hand. Victor was on him in an instant. A twist, a throw, and Morgon lay on the ground, and Victor held the beamer.

The assassin smiled down at his cowering prey. "Don't look so frightened," he said. "I'm not going to kill you. We're going back to the settlement. Foster will get us passage to service HQ, where I'll turn you over — alive — to the proper authorities. There'll be a stink over this, but that's too damn bad. I'm through cleaning up their messes for them."

Morgon blinked rapidly through tears of pain, his hand cradled against his chest, blood oozing into his shirt and down his pants. "You're crazy," he gasped. "They'll never let you off New Eden."

"Maybe. I really don't care what they do." He leaned over and yanked his dagger free, and tsked at Morgon's scream. "Oh, quit your whining," he said as he wiped and sheathed the blade. "It's not that bad. I'll help you bandage it, then we'll signal those pteros. I don't intend to walk all the way back."

"Pteros?" Morgon said stupidly, and stared into the sky. His eyes grew cold with horror. That stare, and the now dangerously close slap of wings against air made Victor look up. Morgon choked on a word that could not break free.

The reptiles shrilling overhead were not pteros, Their bodies were far smaller, the length of a man's, the ribbed wings long and narrow, the heads round and vulture-bald, the hides red as fire. Flecks of amber spattered beaks studded with yellow needle teeth. They eyed the Terrans on the ground with eager, mindless hunger.

The word Morgon wanted freed itself in a whisper. "Rhams."

Coolly Victor studied this new danger. Eight rhams flapped overhead; others hovered in the distance. They didn't look so threatening. A few shots ought to scare them off. He raised the beamer toward the closest and took aim.

Intent on the rhams, Victor did not realize Morgon had gained his feet until the Terran agent slammed into him from behind and knocked him belly-first to the ground. Victor's breath left him in a startled whoosh, and the beamer slipped out of his grasp. Mor-

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gon scrambled for it and fumbled it into his good hand. He hopped back a step and took aim at Victor's head. At that moment a rham screamed and dropped from the sky. Morgon jerked up the gun and fired; the lightbeam missed the beast, which veered off with a squawk. A second rham slid into a smooth, preparatory spiral. "No choice, damn it," Morgon muttered. As the rham tucked its wings for a dive Morgon backed to the transmitter, gathered it clumsily under one arm, and dashed for the safety of the forest, leaving Victor to his fate.

Victor hugged the ground, motionless, his breath captive behind tense, clamped jaws. Foster said the rhams were stupid. Maybe. ...

With a paralyzing shriek the reptile dove, straight at Victor — and skimmed over him in pursuit of Morgon, the moving quarry that had caught its eye. Alerted by the hum of its wings, Morgon glanced over his shoulder and saw the beast bearing down on him. He snapped off a single panicked shot before the rham fell upon him. His scream rose high and died abruptly, replaced after a time by the rham's greedy chortles, and meaty tearing sounds.

Victor shut his mind against the noises behind him; he could not afford to think about them now. Survival came first. He slid his hand down along his side until he touched his dagger. An inch at a time, he eased to his feet, the knife clasped tight and ready in his hand. Most of the flock had retreated to the upper skies, the better to spot any other prey that might be in the area. A few harried their feeding flockmate. The rham, crouched protectively over its bloody prize, hissed and snapped at them. Near it in the dirt lay the transmitter and the hardlight beamer.

The forest was too far away; he would never reach it without being spotted, and he couldn't fight off a flock of rhams with a knife. He needed the beamer. The nearest rhams were distracted with each other, the rest too high up to matter. He started to creep toward the gun.

A rham hovered, screeched. It had seen him. Abandoning caution, Victor lunged for the beamer. He caught it up, whirled, and fired blindly at the thunderous crack of wings. Two rhams sheared off, one with a shallow burn high on its leg, the other wobbling on an injured wing. The flock at once turned on their injured fellows and tore them apart in midair. The rest streamed down from the skies to share the kill. Dinner for everybody, Victor thought, and his best chance for escape. He bolted for the forest—

He saw the flash of red from the corner of his eye and twisted round to fire. Powerful wings buffeted him off balance before he could shoot; footclaws ripped through clothing and skin as the rham seized him by the torso and bore him to the ground. Victor jerked up the pistol. The sudden move-

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ment caught the rham's attention, and it swung its head about to face this new attack. Its beak cracked against his arm with the force of a hammer; fiery bolts of pain lanced through his arm before the limb went numb. Satisfied, the rham chuckled gleefully and shifted its claws for a better grip. The instant its hold loosened Victor gathered his legs and slammed a kick into its chest. The creature was astonishingly light, no more than paper stretched over bird-thin bones. It stumbled backward with a screech, but righted itself almost at once with a wild flapping of wings.

Before Victor could recover his fallen beamer, the rham was on him again. One foot clamped to his left arm, pinning his dagger hand; the other gouged into his right thigh. Its hide filled the world like a wall of flame; the thick, hot stench of poison and reptile burned in his nose like smoke. Dark, viscous runnels of human blood mingled on its jaws with the poison that oozed from its teeth, that spattered on his skin and clothes and sizzled like live coals. Its eyes, the color of hoarded gold, were flat as stone, empty of intelligence. Those soulless, golden eyes rushed toward him as the rham's beak darted down.

At the last instant Victor managed to thrash himself aside. The rham's teeth missed his neck and instead raked his side from armpit to hip, leaving a trail of blood and flesh and amber agony like a blast of fire. Screaming, desperate, Victor wrenched his knife arm free and slashed his dagger across the rham's neck. The beast shrieked and half-rose, wings ripping the air, then lunged again at his head. As the reptile's head flashed toward him Victor swung up hard and buried his dagger up to the hilt in the rham's dull golden eye. The rham leaped skyward, snapping blindly, rending the air with ragged whistles as Victor frantically scrabbled out of reach. Only when it finally crashed to earth and lay in a shuddering, thrashing heap did Victor stop to try to catch his breath.

The air seemed thin of a sudden; he could not gulp enough of it. His mangled side, the blood in his veins, burned as if aflame. He was weaponless now. And the rhams—

He looked up. The rhams were scattered across the sky, their screams all but drowned by the furious roars of the huge golden ptero that charged at them, driving them back toward the Finger Cliffs. Intimidated by the ptero's size, the rhams were quick to give up the fight, and retreated from their attacker's rage to hunt for other, easier game.

Victor's lips moved. He climbed shakily to his feet as the ptero dropped down to land. Its whistle of greeting turned shrill with alarm. Victor opened his mouth to speak. The word, Gonal's name, shattered before he could voice it. He pitched forward onto the grass.

So this is it," the man murmured. "It's not so bad, really. Look. I slew a

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dragon. My lifelong ambition." He jerked his chin toward the still-twitching body of the rham. A loose laugh rattled in his throat.

The ptero whimpered. Its head went up. It crab-stepped away from the man and leaped. In seconds it was lost to sight. "I don't blame you," the man whispered, "but I wish...."

His voice rasped away to nothing. His breath came in shuddering gasps. He smiled to himself. A hero's death. He shut his eyes and let himself slide into darkness.

Light.

It scratched insistently at his eyes, in spite of his efforts to squeeze his lids shut against it. A hum as of insects filled his ears. Something pricked his arm. His brain exploded with instructions, reflexive defenses against attack, but his body would not cooperate. The best it could manage was a shudder. Firm hands held him steady. "Lie still," one of the insects buzzed. "Enos, fetch more serum."

Victor had to blink his gummy eyes several times before he could keep them open. He focused on three figures: Enos; a stranger in a blue-dyed, woven shirt; and Gonal. "Lie still," the man in blue repeated. "You had a close brush with rham poison. Another five minutes ... well, as it is, you're going to be mighty sick for the next few days." He passed his hand over Victor's body, eliciting an electric tingle that seemed to vibrate through his very cells. "I'm going to give you another shot, just to play it safe."

Enos handed the man a hypodermic. The needle was of Terran manufacture, but the antitoxin was carried in treated bladder bags. The man in blue jabbed the hypo expertly into Victor's arm. Victor, watching dully, slowly widened his eyes in astonishment. His mangled side was whole again, unmarred by scratch or scar. "Yes, I fixed it," the stranger said matter-of-factly, noting Victor's stare. "That's what we healers do. Poisons are a tougher matter, though, so we don't mind a bit of help." He held up the hypo and winked.

"How did you find me?" Victor croaked.

"Gonal's doing," Enos said. "We knew you couldn't last long out here, not without supplies, so the council voted to wait you out. Gonal, though, insisted on searching for you, and Vassi joined him. She spotted you telepathically in the middle of the rham flock and called us here while Gonal drove them off. Even so, it was a pretty near thing."

"Vassi? She helped—?" Ignoring the healer's protestations, Victor shoved himself up on one unsteady elbow. Vassi came into his line of sight, crouched just behind Gonal. She snarled at him, tail writhing. Enos grinned and fingered his jaw. "You didn't kill me. Consider it a favor returned. If I may quote...." He glanced at the brown ptero, who hissed and turned

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her head. " 'Even a deafbrained Terran doesn't deserve to be rham bait.' "

"Indeed?" Victor chuckled. "My thanks, madam." He inclined his head. Vassi pretended not to notice.

The healer stood, dusting his hands on his shirt. "I've done my part. Your own people can take over now."

"Then you're letting me go back to the settlement?"

"They can care for you better than we can," Enos said. "But don't think this means you're free. We've already complained to your government. Even with Morgon gone, the fact of Terra's treachery remains."

"*Our* treachery?" Victor drawled. "What about yours? Your telepaths?"

Enos shuffled uncomfortably. "Self-defense," he said at last. "You can't deny it was justified." Vassi rumbled acidly. Gonal shushed her. "Major Toshiro, the last thing we want is war with your Nest. Now that this nasty egg has hatched ... with luck, we'll be able to reach some kind of peaceful agreement. We'll have to see." He gestured briskly to Vassi and reached for Victor's arm. "Come. Vassi and I will take you home."

"No." Victor waved him off. His eyes sought Gonal's, hopeful, pleading. "If he'll carry me..."

Gonal chittered to the healer, who shrugged assent. "Fine by me, if Gonal's willing, I'll ride along to make sure you don't slide off."

Victor let Enos and the healer help him to his feet, but, once standing, he shook them away and tottered the few feet to the ptero. He reached up to touch Gonal's neck, and felt the warmth of a dream beneath his hands. His lips moved with words he could not speak. Gonal murmured and touched his cheek, as if he could indeed hear Victor's thoughts.

Victor did not stay conscious throughout the entire flight back to the Terran settlement, but that did not matter. He was awake long enough to feel the bunch and stretch of muscles beneath his thighs as Gonal lifted off, hear the whistle of air struck by powerful wings, see the ground fly beneath them like the passing of a dream. When unconsciousness stretched out its arms to catch him, Victor was ready to fall. His last fuzzy sight was of Gonal's long head, half-turned round to look at him. The ptero's throat pulsated as he warbled with true draconic cheer.

The Chosen healer had not lied; Victor was sick for three days. During that time, things changed. Both sides were forced to admit to, and apologize for, spying and breach of treaty. As a sign of good faith, the pteros insisted a Terran research group be given permission to visit the cliffs to observe firsthand the natives' esper talents. Afterward, a meeting would be arranged between envoys from Terra and the Nest; in time, new agreements would be reached, new treaties signed. Relations had been strained, but not

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broken. Though healing might take some time, it was better than war.

Victor cared nothing for the planets' political maneuvers. While his body recovered from the poison, his mind had time to ponder a discontent that had taken root he knew not when and finally come to fruition. He could see the evil clearly now, see the murderous, bloody dragon that was his way of life, and he knew at last how to slay it.

On the fourth day, after the settlement's physicians pronounced him fit, Victor handed in his official report to Foster, along with his resignation. That night he took the Fever.

He awoke to warm sunlight on his face. The world tasted different to his senses, but he could not say precisely how until he took a deep breath. The acid in the air was gone; it smelled of grass and summer flowers. "I made it," he said aloud.

"Obviously," Foster said from his seat at Victor's bedside. "How do you feel?"

Foster was nursing a cup of coffee. Its brown aroma pierced Victor's nose, acrid and poisonous. "Acclimated," he answered. "How did Central take my defection?"

"I haven't told them yet. I'll send your report along after you leave for the cliffs. Any idea what you'll do now?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll take up wood carving." He laughed. "I've always been good with a knife."

"Speaking of which..." Foster handed him a long object wrapped in silken cloth. Victor fingered the familiar sharpness of hard metal within the silk. "Enos cleaned it up for you. I took the liberty of packing your gear, such as it was. Your escort's been waiting at the landing field for the past couple of hours." He took Victor's hand and pumped it vigorously. "Good luck, Major."

The "escort" turned out to be two pteros. Brown and gold, Victor noticed from a distance. Vassi and Gonal.

When the voices sounded in his mind, he almost cried out.

He looks well. The woman's voice was sultry and faintly edged. *He could teach the Chosen much about his Nest, don't you agree?*

I think we should let him decide. The man's tenor held a chuckle. Victor recognized that voice, though he had never heard it before. It was Gonal's voice. His dragon's voice.

You're awfully eager to have him join us, Vassi, Gonal continued. *I thought you objected to Terran interference.*

I do. A Nestian is different. Victor stopped before them. Vassi bent her long neck, and he bowed in return. *Good day, Major Toshiro. Welcome to the Nest.* Her tailtip twitched. *We'll have to do something about that name. It sounds too Terran for my taste.*

Vassi. Gonal growled at her. She

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hissed archly and rose with an effortless sweep of her wings. Gonal gazed after her wearily; his whole attitude spoke of long-suffering. *There are some unpleasant aspects to life on the Nest,* he told Victor. *She's one of them.* Voice gentling, he added, *Are you ready to go?*

"Ready? I've waited a lifetime for this." Gonal squatted low. Victor's mount was unsteady, but practice and the ptero's coaching would soon correct that. He held tight with his knees, as Gonal instructed, and let his partner fly him away from the settlement to his new life in the Chosen's cliffs, a life free from death and free from dragons.

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Damon Knight has never been a particularly prolific writer, but his fiction is always worth the wait; witness this compelling and adroit new story about the discovery of a strange manuscript...

La Ronde

BY

DAMON KNIGHT

He felt that he was gone a long time, and when he came back from wherever it was, he found himself sitting on a stone, gazing at a wrecked automobile that was tilted upside down against a tree. One of the front wheels was lazily turning. The door on the driver's side hung open; below it the whole top of the car had been crushed flat, and it seemed to him a miracle that anyone had got out alive.

There was a buzzing in his head, but he stood up and went closer to the wreck to see if anyone needed help. The car was empty. What could have become of the driver?

For that matter, what was he himself doing here? Perhaps it would come back to him in a minute, when he was rested. He went all around the car with a kind of dumb obstinacy, through brush that whipped his legs under his coat. No one was there.

Above him there was a broad muddy swath, littered with glass, bits of chrome, and more incongruous things — scattered pieces of white tissue, sunglasses, a pack of cigarettes. He climbed, helping himself up from one sapling to another, until he reached the highway, where he stood looking uncertainly around him. There were long black skid marks on the macadam. The road made a curve here, and on the opposite side the slope resumed, rising another hundred feet against the gray sky. It was very cold.

He peered down the slope again, thinking that from this elevation he might be able to see the body of the driver, but he could barely make out the wreck itself through the screen of branches.

Although he could not think very clearly because of the continuous dull buzzing in his head, he knew that he

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ought to report the accident, and he trudged out around the curve in the direction the car had been going. The road straightened here for a distance of half a mile or so; it was empty and gray under the sky, with the gloomy forested slope on one side and the ravine on the other. There were no highway signs, no billboards, nothing to tell him where he might be.

The road ran on, empty and cold under the gray sky. The forested hill was behind him now and on either side were bare fields. A few flakes of snow came drifting along; they melted at once on the highway. Then the snow came more thickly and made a white film in which he left a trail of glistening footprints. For some reason this alarmed him, but when he looked back after a few minutes, he saw that the prints were rapidly being covered.

He went on, with the snow whipping into his eyes, until he came to a private road with a chain across it. He ducked under the chain. The road went up steeply, covered with dead leaves and fallen branches. Over the crest of the rise, it ran straight between fields grown up with tall weeds to a white house on a hill. While he was climbing the slope he had been sheltered a little from the wind-driven snow, but now it flew at him again. As he approached the house he could see that the windows were boarded up. The big front door had a padlock on it. He went around the house and found the back door padlocked too.

As he stood under the eaves to get out of the wind, he noticed an oblong pit covered by a framework of metal bars next to the foundation. He crouched over it and tugged at the framework; the metal was rusted and heavy, but it came up. He laid it aside. When he had cleared out the dead leaves and spruce needles underneath, he found, as he had guessed, that the pit was a light-well for a cellar window. He pulled up the hinged window, crawled through and dropped into musty darkness.

The light from the cobwebbed glass was water-gray, but it was enough to show him the wooden steps that led up to a trap-door. When he raised the trap, he found himself in a long gray room illuminated only by a watery glow at one of the windows. It was cold — colder, it seemed, than the outdoors. His ghostly breath rose in the air.

There was firewood and kindling in a box beside the old-fashioned cookstove, but not a scrap of paper, though he opened one drawer after another and lighted matches to look in. In one of the drawers he found the stub of a candle, and with this in his shivering hand he went through a pantry into a dining room, and from there into a library. Even here there were no newspapers, only the moldy-apricot-colored leather books in the glass-fronted bookcases. He retreated into the kitchen, and this time opened the doors of cabinets, where he found brit-

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tle shelf paper under the heavy old plates and tumblers. He pulled out a few pieces of this, and presently had a fire going in the stove.

The tall wooden icebox was empty, but he found peaches in a glass jar in the pantry. The jar was like none he had ever seen; it had a glass top held down by two jointed handles, and a red rubber gasket between jar and lid. He stood beside the stove, which was now radiating an almost imperceptible warmth, and ate the peaches with a cold metallic-tasting spoon.

There was a kerosene lamp on the kitchen table; he filled it from a can he found in the pantry and lighted it. It smoked at first, blackening the inside of the glass chimney, until he found out how to adjust and trim the wick. Carrying the lamp, he mounted the back stairway and found two bedrooms. The beds had been stripped, but the mattresses, covered with coarse gray-striped twill, remained. He dragged one of them down the stairs to the kitchen; there, in front of the stove, he stretched out in his clothes and fell asleep.

The cold woke him early in the morning; the fire had gone out. He built it up again, ate the rest of the peaches for breakfast, and then set out to explore the house. All the furniture was Victorian, even the pieces that looked almost new. Under the high crossbeamed ceiling hung a black wrought iron chandelier with candles in it. Kerosene lamps with painted china shades were on all the tables. The living room, dining room, and library had fireplaces, red brick in the living room, green tile in the other two; there were fireplaces in two of the upstairs bedrooms as well. Two other upstairs rooms had doors which he could not open.

He went down again to forage in the pantry. He found sacks of flour and cornmeal, cans of condensed milk, oil and lard, and jar after jar of preserved fruit and vegetables. There was plenty of wood stacked on the porch and in the yard.

With tools he found in the cellar he pried loose the staple that held the padlock on the back door, so that he could go in and out freely while leaving the door apparently still locked. Gray smoke ascended from the kitchen chimney; he could not help that, but the sky was so overcast, although it was no longer snowing, that he thought the smoke would not be seen.

With flour, water and condensed milk he mixed a batter and made pancakes. There was even a whole cheese, not very moldy; he cut off the bad part and ate a wedge with his pancakes.

Afterward he made fires in all the fireplaces downstairs. He fed them until they roared in the chimneys, but the stubborn cold of the house yielded slowly. Even when he sat in a wing chair with his feet on the hearth, he could feel the insistent chill probing at his back.

All through the house, the firelight

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sent shadows racing up the walls. These shadows disturbed him, and he went to work filling the oil lamps, trimming and adjusting their wicks.

Nowhere in the house was there any electrical appliance: no lights, no television, not even a radio. There were no newspapers, and no magazines except for the bound volumes of *Harper's* and *The Century* in the library. Even the bathroom fixtures were old; the shower (which did not work) was a vast sunflower-head of metal suspended on a stalk over the claw-footed bathtub. In the mahogany medicine cabinet he found bone toothbrushes with black hog-bristles, and medicines in plain brown bottles with paper labels: ipecac, calamine. Yet he knew that the house could not have been abandoned for more than a year of two; there was dust everywhere, but only a light film, not the accumulation of a century. Moreover, it was curious, in a house with so much food in it, that there was no sign of rats.

He was reluctant to damage anything in the house, but in the end his curiosity won out, and he forced the two locked doors upstairs. Behind one of them was a lumber room, choked with bedsteads, sofas, chairs, all dusty and soiled, but modern in appearance. The second room had been fitted out as an office, with an oak desk, a leather armchair, and an ancient Royal typewriter, the kind with a little glass window in the side through which part of the works could be seen.

Beside the typewriter lay a sheaf of manuscript. The first few words caught his eye, and he sat down to read.

My maternal great-grandfather built his house on a terrace at the foot of a wooded hill in Potamos Township, near the New York and New Jersey borders of Pennsylvania in what they now call the "Tri-States" area. Behind the house there are seven Norway spruces, of which the tallest is about eighty feet; the ground beneath them is carpeted with brown needles, and the wind moves quietly through their branches. Farther up the hill are Scotch pines, native spruces and firs, maples, and birch. Still farther up, a mile or so above the house, there is an old logging road, now grown up in maple saplings, and above that the foundations of a settler's cabin, the stones barely visible in the underbrush. Except for these, and a power line that crosses the hill, there is no sign of human habitation.

The house itself is of white-painted frame and shiplap construction, three stories tall, with dormers, a veranda and an Italian slate roof. Over the years it has settled, having been built without footings, as the custom then was, but the frame is sturdy; I remember that an electrician who was called in to wire the house, when I was a boy, complained that he had to drill through innumerable "cats," diagonal framing members which united the studs.

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The downstairs rooms are paneled in golden oak; the floors are parquet. All the rooms, even the old servants' quarters on the third floor, are ample in size; the living room ceiling is eighteen feet high, and the rest fifteen. These high ceilings make the house "hard to heat," as the local expression has it, but they give a sense of spaciousness and a quality of sound entirely different from that in "modern" cheap-jack houses. It is a soothing and relaxing ambience, a feeling of permanence and safety, which must be experienced to be appreciated.

When I saw the house again, after the death of my aunt Margaret in 1978, the silences of the vast rooms seemed to speak of boyhood pleasures. I am half-convinced that houses somehow soak up the psychic experiences of their inhabitants; there are certain houses that have a mean-spirited or discouraged air, and there are city apartments which seem to radiate a sense of irritability, as if the walls still contained the last echoes of an angry shout.

My aunt Margaret, who had lived in this house since I was a boy, and to whom my parents willed the possession and use of the property during her lifetime, was, I now think, a kindred soul; we were alike at least in that each of us was happiest in a state of nonmatrimony. When I was a child, however, I disliked and feared her, because she sometimes seemed aware of my existence and sometimes not.

It was she who had redecorated the house and covered all the sofas with chintz, hung "modern" pictures and strewn the coffee tables with cigarette boxes and French novels. Yet even her old age and illness seemed to have left no psychic traces in this house. The walls, the cornices, the mantelpieces seemed to say, "Here we are, as we have always been. Why have you stayed away so long?"

I must add that although there were no ghosts in the house itself, the cellar was another matter. It was irregular and low, angling around a huge stone that had been too big for the excavators to remove; to reach it, one went down through a trap in the kitchen and then had to walk stooping along a sort of cobwebbed passageway to reach the farther room where the furnace was. In this chamber, so long as the light was on, I felt no uneasiness, but in the stifling dark something was there, some malevolent and incoherent impulse that was older than the house.

Against the well-meant advice of my friends, I settled my affairs in New York, retired from my practice, sold most of my furniture, and disposed of my lease. In September I moved into the old house. A local woman, Mrs. Beveridge, helped me set the place to rights. I gathered that she was a recent widow, in straitened circumstances; I asked her to stay on as my housekeeper, and she agreed.

Mrs. Beveridge was a woman of perhaps fifty, sturdily built, with pale

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skin and dark hair which she wore in an old-fashioned bun. Her husband, whom she rarely mentioned, had been a carpenter or roofer or something of that sort; she herself had had little education, but she had a high degree of native intelligence and had formed her mind by reading. I felt myself lucky to have her, not only because of her efficiency in caring for the house, but because there was no suggestion on either sie of any sexual innuendo between us. She spoke little, in a quiet voice, and adapted her habits perfectly to mine. When I wanted her for any reason she was there; when I wished to be alone she effaced herself. In the evenings she retired to her room on the third floor, where I sometimes heard her radio playing softly.

In November an early storm knocked down power lines and left us without light or heat. Mrs. Beveridge kindled fires in the fireplaces and kept the wood range going in the kitchen; I got out the kerosene lamps which were kept for such emergencies, and we ate by candlelight. During the four days of the storm, I became accustomed to the soft light of lamps and candles and grew to like it. When the power came on again, I discovered that I was actually disappointed. The electric lights seemed cold and impersonal; they revealed too much; I preferred the warm brown darkness, the mystery. I continued to use the lamps; Mrs. Beveridge appeared to have no objection.

With her help, I carried down some pieces of furniture abandoned years ago in the attic The marble-topped dressers and tables were as sound as ever; the chairs and love seats, of course, were upholstered in horsehair, impossibly hard to sit on, and the leather was cracked and peeling. As soon as I was able, I got an upholsterer in Stroudsburg to come out and take these pieces away for refinishing. I had them done in rose and blue plush, or rather mohair, a deep-piled fabric. When they were brought back and arranged in the living room, the remaining modern pieces looked all the more out of place. One by one I got rid of them. At the Auction Barn, so-called, on the Port Jervis road I found a huge icebox and two large copper washtubs. I consulted Mrs. Beveridge about each of these changes, half-expecting her to demur since they involved more labor for her, but she expressed her entire satisfaction, and indeed, I often heard her singing quietly at her work. At last, more than nine months after I had begun, I was able to look about me and see nothing whatever that had been made later than the year 1910. I had, of course, canceled my subscriptions to all newspapers and magazines. Our supplies were delivered in bulk by a Mr. Thomas and stored by Mrs. Beveridge.

From a dealer in Stroudsburg I acquired a parlor organ in fair condition. It had not been converted to motorized operation, as so many old organs have; the bellows was cracked, how-

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ever, and some of the padding under the keys was worn away. When it was restored, it functioned perfectly. The organ had a keyboard of two and a half octaves, and with the use of various stops ("Tremolo," "Celeste," "Vox Humana," and the like) it could produce an astonishing variety of pleasant sounds. I made some effort to learn this instrument, and amused myself with it sometimes when Mrs. Beveridge was at her work, but she was so much better at it than I that in the evenings I merely sat and listened to her play. We had a music book, published in the 1880s, which contained some charming things of Schubert's, as well as some sacred music and even a few popular songs.

I discovered in myself an insatiable appetite for Victorian literature — novels, miscellanies, journals. That spring I haunted the antique shops and secondhand stores around Potamos. One of my prizes was a leather-bound set of Dickens, published in 1878, with the original illustrations; another was a work entitled *Dr. Hood's Plain Talks and Common Sense Medical Adviser*, a quaint heavy volume which recommended prussic acid for stomach ulcers, and cocaine for heroin addiction. As for health care, I knew quite well that if I became seriously ill I should have to seek modern medical treatment, but my health was good as long as I took care not to overstrain my heart, and Mrs. Beveridge was never ill.

I was aware that the Victorian life I was attempting to re-create within these walls was not the reality. The songs of Victorian men and women were not all decorous, nor were all their habits nice. A real Victorian bachelor in my situation would long before now, in all probability, have undone the laces of his housekeeper's underwear. No, it was not the real Victorian world that I was attempting to re-create, but my boyhood's imaginary world of safety, serenity, and gentleness.

I confess that I was as much alarmed as pleased by the alacrity with which Mrs. Beveridge fell in with my scheme. Never once did she suggst even by a smile or a gesture that what we were doing was absurd. She seemed to take it all as perfectly normal, and it was this that alarmed me. Either we were falling together into a folie á deux, or she was humoring me, with consummate skill, for some motive of her own which I could not guess.

At any rate, the life we now began to lead was so pleasant that I ceased to question it. In the mornings, in fine weather, I tended my garden; in the afternoons I worked in my study, and in the evenings Mrs. Beveridge and I decorously diverted ourselves. On fair days the house was sunny, and the porch pillars, which I could see through the glass pane of the door at the far end of the living room, gave back the pure essence of light. But it is the winter evenings that I remember

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with more pleasure, when the whole world was shut out in darkness, and the lamps were surrounded by a brown gloom.

With the aid of an old book of parlor tricks and games, Mrs. Beveridge and I relearned the art of the cat's cradle, forming more and more intricate figures with a loop of string. Beginning with the Cat's Cradle, we went on to the Calm Sea, the Upturned Cradle, the Mattress Turned Over, the Cat's Eye, the Pig on the Pegs. We also played at making hand shadows on the wall: the Bird in Flight, the Tortoise, the Goose a Prisoner (in which one hand grips the wrist of the other which forms the goose), and so on; we played word games, at which Mrs. Beveridge was very good, and sometimes Anagrams, Scat, or Old Maid.

I counted, I say, on the fact that I was completely aware of my own deepening obsession, but this belief was shaken one morning, when, arising earlier than usual, I went down to the kitchen to see if there was any coffee. It was about seven o'clock; the day was clear, and the sunlight reflecting from the white snow gave a shimmer to the atmosphere. Mrs. Beveridge was nowhere in sight, but a man in a long coat was carrying a sack up the steps of the back porch to the pantry. At first I thought he was Mr. Thomas; then I saw that he was an older and stouter man, and when he shifted his burden noticed that he was wearing a long brown apron under his coat. He turned and stumped down the stairs again, and as I went to another window to watch him, I distinctly saw him get up on the driver's seat of a wagon drawn by two massive horses. I saw the wagon move off down the driveway; then it was gone.

When Mrs. Beveridge came in a few moments later, I asked her, "Who was here just now?"

"Why, Mr. Thomas," she replied, and gave me such a puzzled look that I could not say any more.

One of our evening amusements was the Ouija board. Mrs. Beveridge was very adept at this, and under her fingertips the planchette swept rapidly about the board, spelling out ambiguous communications from various defunct notables (Napoleon informed us, for instance, that he did not like fish).

I soon noticed that she could manipulate the planchette by herself, and it was not long before I discovered that she often went into light trance while doing so. This gave me the notion of trying to deepen the trance, to which she readily assented, and I found her to be an excellent subject; after a few sessions she exhibited all the classical signs of deep trance: catalepsy, glove anesthesia, amnesia, hallucination, and all the rest. I was able to suggest to her that her hand would write automatically, a procedure less tiresome than the Ouija board. While she sat with her eyes closed, the pencil in her fingers traced large, childish letters, only a dozen or so to a page. When her

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pencil slipped off the edge of the paper she seemed to know it, and after a moment's hesitation would begin a new line; when she reached the bottom of the paper I lifted her hand, put a fresh sheet under it, and she began where she had left off, even if it were in the middle of a word.

When I say that her writing was childish I mean to be understood literally; not only were the letters large and painfully formed, but the *t's* were often uncrossed and there were many misspellings, "annd" for "and," for example, and "pulleded" for "pulled." The lines sloped more and more downward as she wrote, and that seemed curious to me, because she was right-handed. When something agitated her, as when I asked her to describe a dream she had had the night before, her writing grew more irregular and the lines sometimes ran into each other.

These sessions were tiring to her, but she was as interested by their results as I was, and we performed them at least two or three times a week for a considerable period. We had been able to dispense with hypnotic induction entirely, by the use of posthypnotic suggestion; after having settled herself comfortably, on a word of command, she would go promptly into deep trance and begin to write. Ordinarily I would suggest a topic, but on several occasions she produced rather surprising things without any prompting from me. Her most elaborate effort was a narrative which she produced in the course of five consecutive sessions. In each case I woke her after three-quarters of an hour, and on the following evening I suggested to her that she would go on with the narrative until it was done. The transcript which follows is verbatim except for the correction of errors in spelling, the elimination of repetitions, etc.

Some people seem to be born with a taste for violence. One of these was a man named Norman Edwards, who lived with his wife Sally in a hillside house in a suburb of Newark, New Jersey. The living room and master bedroom were upstairs, the kitchen, family room, and spare bedroom were down. Edwards, who worked as an insurance underwriter in Newark, was a man in his thirties, pale, horse-faced, deceptively slender. His hands were large, and he enjoyed using them.

One Saturday morning in early October he was taking down the screens on the side of the house when he heard the water hiss in the upstairs bathroom. Sally had slept late that morning. Edwards raised the window quietly and put his head in. He saw her body moving against the blue shower curtain in he tub. He leaned in over the windowsill, stretched as far as he could, and grabbed her leg. He heard a shriek and a thump. He waited, but the water kept on running. "Sally?" he said. She did not answer.

He climbed in the window and

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twitched the shower curtain aside. She was lying in the tub with her yellow shower cap on. A little blood from her nose was washing away in pink trails. He turned off the water and pulled her upright. Her eyes were open, but she looked stuporous.

He had her dressed by the time the doctor came; by then her nose was beginning to swell. It was broken, as it turned out, and they kept her in the hospital overnight to see if she had a concussion. When Edwards saw her the next day there was a red and purple bruise spreading out from under the bandage, and she had two beautiful shiners. "It was just a joke, Sally," he said, but she turned her head away.

That afternoon her sister Wanda came over. "Sally sent me for some things." She walked past him up the stairs.

"They going to keep her? I thought she was getting out today." Edwards followed her.

"That's it. Some complications," Wanda said. She opened a suitcase on the bed and began pulling things out of bureau drawers. When she finished packing the suitcase, she started on another.

"She doesn't need all that in the hospital," Edwards said.

"She might," Wanda said. She lifted the two suitcases and walked past him.

He caught up with her downstairs and crowded her against the wall. "You're lying, aren't you?" he said. "She isn't coming home."

"That's right," Wanda said, "and *listen to me*, you bastard, if you lay a hand on me, Morris will kill you. Now get out of my way."

After a moment he stepped back, and she carried the suitcases down to her car, got in and drove off.

When he thought about the incident, Edwards realized that he was hearing in his mind the sound Sally's nose had made when it hit the water faucet, a sort of crunching *click*. He had not actually heard the sound, but it was perfectly clear to him, and he found himself playing it over and over, each time with the same little stab of pleasure.

It was not a complete surprise to him that he felt this way. Once, as a boy, he had hit his older brother Tim with a baseball bat, and he had heard the same sort of sound — a *thud*, with a sharp little *crack* in the middle of it when Tim's collarbone had broken.

Edwards called Wanda's number several times, hoping Sally would answer the phone, but it was always Wanda or Morris, and they told him Sally didn't want to talk to him. Twice he went to their house and made a nuisance of himself. On the day after the second of these visits, when Wanda had threatened to call the police, Morris Hollander came to see Edwards. Hollander, Sally's sister's husband, was a prosperous man who had business interests up and down New Jersey. He was much older than Wanda, at

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least sixty, but he was still trim and erect. His sleek hair was not white, not gray, but something in between, and he wore emerald cuff links.

"Hello, Morris, what do you want?" Edwards said.

"You can't invite me in? We have to talk on the doorstep?"

"All right," said Edwards, and led the way upstairs to the living room.

Hollander laid his hat carefully on the sofa; but he did not sit down or take off his black overcoat. "Norman," he said, "I'll put the whole thing in a nutshell. You're making Sally nervous, she don't want to see you, so what good is it? Save the aggravation."

"Sally is my wife," Edwards said.

"O.K., why not treat her like a wife? Arguments I understand, believe me, and even to hit someone I understand, but to break your wife's nose — this I don't understand."

"It was an accident."

"So? A woman is taking a shower, you reach through the window and grab her leg — this is an accident? If you're walking down the street, I throw a banana peel under your foot, you fall and break your hip — this is also an accident?"

The old man took a turn around the room. "I was married to my first wife, she should rest in peace, twenty-seven years. To me a divorce is a shame. But I wouldn't say to Sally, go back to him, your place is with your husband. It's better she shouldn't have more accidents."

He turned and gave Edwards one level look. "So, now I said what I came to say. Don't make no more trouble. Good-bye, Norman."

Edwards was thinking about the phrase, "fall and break your hip," and in the plosive of the last word he seemed to hear the faint sound of a breaking bone. As Hollander started down the stairs, he said, "Morris."

The old man half-turned, taking his hand off the banister. "Yes?"

"Go to hell." Edwards kicked him hard in the chest. The old man fell backward and clattered down the stairs. When Edwards got to him, he was lying against the wall with his neck bent, and he was dead.

Edwards knelt, got his arms under the body, hoisted it to his chest with an effort, and stood. As he carried it through the kitchen, the phone began to ring. He put his foot on a chair, steadied the body with his knee and one arm, picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Norman, this is Wanda. Excuse me for calling, but is Morris there?"

"Morris? No," he said, speaking over the dead man's face. "Why would he be here?"

"Well, he said he was going to stop by on his way home from Sparta. Anyway, if he comes over there, would you please ask him to call me?"

"Sure. 'Bye."

He put the receiver down, hoisted the body chest-high again, and went out to the driveway where Morris's big

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blue Lincoln was parked. He toppled the body gently into the trunk headfirst, moved the heavy arm that seemed to want to cling to him, then folded the legs. He explored the pockets gingerly for car keys, found them, and stepped back.

The body lay on its side, one arm underneath. By the time he got where he was going, it would be stiff; it might be harder to get out of the trunk. He bent the legs upward as far as he could, folded the arm. The other one was too hard to get at; this would have to do. What else? The hat. Where was the hat?

Edwards went back through the kitchen, glancing at the phone, but it did not ring. He found Morris's hat under the little table at the foot of the stairs, hiding there like a black animal. He put it on top of the body in the trunk, closed the lid, and went back inside for his jacket and topcoat. When he pulled out onto the street, it was just after two o'clock.

The day was cold and bright, the road clear; most of the traffic was coming the other way. According to the map, there were three or four lakes and reservoirs not far from U.S. Route 206. Edwards drove steadily north, keeping just under the speed limit. The car handled well. At Netcong he turned northeast to have a look at Lake Hopatcong. The approaches were too shallow, and there were too many trailers parked on the shore. He kept going around the lake, then northwest again to lake Mohawk, but it did not suit him, either. He drove through Newton, Lafayette, and Augusta. North of Branchville there was a turnoff marked "Culvers Lake." Edwards kept on going. He realized now that the Jersey lakes would not do. He was close to the state line already; somewhere along the Delaware there would be a private place where he could tip the car down into deep water. Then he would walk or hitchhike to the nearest town, stay in a motel overnight, and take the bus home in the morning.

North of Dingmans Ferry the map showed the highway running close to the river, and he glimpsed it, or thought he did, occasionally through the trees, but there was no good approach. The sky had turned gray; there were a few flakes of snow. He turned on his headlights. A curve came up, too fast. As he swung around it, braking, two yellow-white eyes leaped into view, the headlights of another car. He turned frantically, saw the lights blaze up, felt a hammering jolt. Then things began to become very queer.

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Fred Pohl points out that his new story below is a fresh treatment of the same theme as his first F&SF contribution, "The Census Takers," (February 1956). The theme is overpopulation, and while it is not as in vogue a subject as it once was in SF, the problem has far from gone away...

Spending A Day At the Lottery Fair

BY
FREDERIK POHL

They were the Baxter family, Randolph and Millicent the parents, with their three children, Emma and Simon and Louisa, who was the littlest; and they didn't come to the fair in any old bus. No, they drove up in a taxi, all the way from their home clear on the other side of town, laughing and poking each other, and when they got out Randolph Baxter gave the driver a really big tip. It wasn't that he could really afford it. It was just because he felt it was the right thing to do. When you took your whole family to the Lottery Fair, Baxter believed, you might as well do it in style. Besides, the fare was only money. Though Millicent Baxter pursed her lips when she saw the size of the tip, she certainly was not angry; her eyes sparkled as brightly as the children's, and together they stared at the facade of the Lottery Fair.

Even before you got through the gates there was a carnival smell — buttered popcorn and cotton candy and tacos all together — and a carnival sound of merry-go-round organs and people screaming in the roller coaster, and bands and bagpipes from far away. A clown stalked on tall stilts through the fairgoers lining up at the ticket windows, bending down to chuck children under the chin and making believe to nibble the ears of teenage girls in bright summer shorts. Rainbow fountains splashed perfumy spray. People in cartoon-character costumes, Gus the Ghost and Mickey Mouse and Pac-Man, handed out free surprise packages to the kids: when Simon opened his it was a propeller beanie; a fan for Emma; for little Louisa, cardboard glasses with a Groucho Marx moustache. And crowded! You could hardly believe such crowds! Off to one side of the parking

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lot the tour buses were rolling in with their loads of foreign visitors, Chinese and Argentines and Swedes; they had special entrances and were waved through by special guards who greeted them, some of the time anyway, in their own native languages — *"Willkommen!"* and *"Bonjour!"* and *"Ey there, mate!"* — as long as they didn't speak anything like Urdu or Serbo-Croatian, anyway. For the foreign tourists didn't have to pay in the usual way; they bought their tickets in their country of origin, with valuable foreign exchange, and then everything was free for them.

Of course it wasn't like that for the regular American fairgoers. They had to pay. You could see each family group moving up toward the ticket windows. They would slow down as they got closer and finally stop, huddling together while they decided how to pay, and then one or two of them, or all of them, would move on to the window and reach into the admissions cuff for their tickets. Randolph Baxter had long before made up his mind that there would be no such wrangles on this day for his family. He said simply, "Wait here a minute," and strode up to the window by himself. He put his arm into the cuff, smiled at the ticket attendant and said grandly, "I'll take five, please."

The ticket seller looked at him admiringly. "You know," she offered, "there aren't that many daddies who'll take all the little fellows in like that. Sometimes they make even tiny babies get their own tickets." Baxter gave her a modest I-do-what-I-can shrug, though he could not help that his smile was a little strained until all five tickets clicked out of the roll. He bore them proudly back to his family and led them through the turnstiles.

"My, what a crowd," sighed Millicent Baxter happily as she gazed around. "Now, what shall we do first?"

The response was immediate. "See the old automobiles," yelled Simon, and, "No, the animals!" and, "No, the stiffs!" cried his sisters.

Randolph Baxter spoke sharply to them — not angrily, but firmly. "There will be no fighting over what we do," he commanded. "We'll *vote* on what we do, the democratic way. No arguments, and no exceptions. Now," he added, "the first thing we're going to do is that you kids will stay right here while your mother and I get tickets for the job lottery." The parents left the children arguing viciously among themselves and headed for the nearest lottery booth. Randolph Baxter could not help a tingle of excitement, and his wife's eyes were gleaming, as they studied the prize list. The first prize was the management of a whole apartment building — twenty-five thousand dollars a year salary, and a free three-room condo thrown in!

Millicent read his thoughts as they stood in line. "Don't you just wish!" she whispered. "But personally I'd set-

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tle for any of the others. Look, there's even a job for an English teacher!" Randolph shook his head wordlessly. It was just marvelous — five full-time jobs offered in this one raffle, and that not the biggest of the day. The last one, after the fireworks, always had the grandest of prizes. "Aren't you glad we came?" Millicent asked, and her husband nodded.

But in fact he wasn't, altogether, at least until they safely got their tickets and were on their way back to the children, and then he was quickly disconcerted to see that the kids weren't where they had been left. "Oh, hell," groaned Randolph. It was early in the day for them to get lost.

But they weren't very far. His wife said sharply, "There they are. And look what they're doing!" They were at a refreshment stand. And each one of them had a huge cone of frozen custard. "I *told* them not to make any purchases when we weren't with them!" Millicent cried, but in fact it was worse than that. The children were talking to a pair of strange grown-ups, a lean, fair, elderly woman with a sharp, stern face, and a round, dark-skinned man with a bald head and immense tortoiseshell glasses.

As the Baxters approached, the woman turned to them apologetically. "Oh, hullo," she said, "you must be the parents. I do hope you'll forgive us. Mr. Katsubishi and I seem to have lost our tour, and your children kindly helped us look for it."

"It's all right, Dad," Simon put in swiftly. "They're on this foreign tour, see, and everything's free for them anyway. Dad? Why can't we get on a tour and have everything free?"

"We're Americans," his father explained, smiling tentatively at the tall English-looking woman and the tubby, cheerful Japanese — he decided that they didn't *look* like depraved child molesters. "You have to be an international tourist to get these unlimited tickets. And I bet they cost quite a lot of money, don't they?" he appealed to the man, who smiled and shrugged and looked at the woman.

"Mr. Katsubishi doesn't speak English very well," she apologized. "I'm Rachel Millay. Mrs. Millay, that is; although me dear husband left us some years ago." She glanced about in humorous distress. "I don't suppose you've seen a tour leader carrying a green and violet flag with a cross of St. Andrew on it?"

Since Randolph Baxter had no idea what a cross of St. Andrew looked like, it was hard to say. In any case, there were at least twenty tour parties in sight, each with its own individual pennant or standard, trudging in determined merriment toward the pavilions, the rides, or the refreshment stands. "I'm afraid not," he began, and then paused as his wife clutched his arm. The P.A. system crackled, and the winners of the first drawing were announced.

Neither of the Baxters were among

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them. "Well, there are six more drawings," said Millicent bravely — not adding that there were also six more sets of raffle tickets to buy if they wanted any hope of winning one of them. Her husband smiled cheerfully at the children.

"What's it to be?" he asked generously. "The life exhibit? The concert—"

"We already voted, Dad," cried Emma, his elder daughter, "it's the animals!"

"No, the stiffs!" yelled her baby sister.

"The old autos," cried Simon. "Anyway, there won't be any stiffs there until later, not to speak of!"

Baxter smiled indulgently at the foreigners. "Children," he explained. "Well, I do hope you find your group." And he led the way to the first democratically selected adventure of the day, the space exhibit.

Baxter had always had a nostalgic fondness for space, and this was a pretty fine exhibit, harking back to olden, golden days when human beings could spare enough energy and resources to send their people and probes out toward the distant worlds. Even the kids liked it. It was lavish with animated 3-D displays showing a human being walking around on the surface of the Moon, and a spacecraft slipping through the rings of Saturn, and even a probe, though not an American one, hustling after Halley's Comet to take its picture.

But Randolph Baxter had some difficulty in concentrating on the pleasure of the display at first because, as they were getting their tickets, the tall, smiling black man just ahead of him in line put his arm into the admissions cuff, looked startled, withdrew his arm, started to speak and fell over on the ground, his eyes open, and staring, it seemed, right into Randolph Baxter's.

When you have a wife and three kids and no job, living on welfare, never thinking about tomorrow because you know there isn't going to be anything in tomorrow worth thinking about, then a day's outing for the whole family is an event to be treasured. No matter what the price — especially if the price isn't in money. So the Baxter family did it all. They visited six national pavilions, even the Paraguayan. They lunched grandly in the dining room at the summit of the fair's great central theme structure, the Cenotaph. And they did the rides, all the rides, from the Slosh-a-Slide water chutes through the immense Ferris wheel with the wind howling through the open car and Simon threatening to spit down on the crowds below, to the screaming, shattering roller coaster that made little Louisa wet her pants. Fortunately her mother had brought clean underwear for the child. When she sent the little girl off with her sister to change in the ladies' room, she followed them anxiously with her eyes

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until they were safely past the ticket collector, and then said, "Rand, honey. You paid for all those rides yourself."

He shrugged defensively. "I want everybody to have a good time."

"Now, don't talk that way. We agreed. The children and I are going to pay our own way all the rest of the day, and the subject is closed." She proved the point by changing it. "Look," she said, "there are those two foreigners who lost their tour group again." She waved, and Mrs. Millay and Mr. Katsubishi came up diffidently.

"If we're not intruding?" said Mrs. Millay. "We never did find our tour guide, you see, but actually we're getting on quite well without. But isn't it hot! It's never like this in Scotland."

Millicent fanned herself in agreement. "Do sit down, Mrs. Millay. Is that where you're from, Scotland? And you Mr. Kat—, Kats—"

"Katsubishi," he smiled, with an abrupt deep bow. Then he wrinkled his face in concentration for a moment, and managed to say: "I, too — Sukottaland."

Millicent tried not to look astonished, but evidently did not succeed. Mrs. Millay explained, "He from around Kyle of Lochalth, you know." Since Millicent obviously didn't know, she added, "That's the Japanese colony in northern Scotland, near my own home. In fact, I teach English to Japanese schoolchildren there, since I know the language — my parents were missionaries in Honshu, you see. Didn't you know about the colony?"

Actually, Millicent and Randolph did know about the colony. Or, at least, they almost did, in the way that human beings exposed to forty channels of television and with nothing much to do with their time have heard of — without really knowing much about — almost every concept, phenomenon, event, and trend in human history. In just that way, they had heard of the United Kingdom's pact with Japan, allowing large Japanese immigration into an enclave in the north of Scotland. The Japanese made the area bloom both agriculturally and economically. The United Kingdom got a useful injection of Japanese capital and energy, and the Japanese got rid of some of their surplus population without pain. "I wish we'd thought of that," Millicent observed in some envy, but her husband shook his head.

"Different countries, different ways," he said patriotically, "and actually we're doing rather well. I mean, just look at the Lottery Fair! That's American ingenuity for you." Observing that Mrs. Millay was whispering a rapid-fire translation into Mr. Katsubishi's ear, he was encouraged to go on. "Other countries, you see, have their own way of handling their problems. Compulsory sterilization of all babies born in even-numbered years in India, as I'm sure you're aware. The

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contraceptive drugs they put in the water supply in Mexico — and we don't even talk of what they're doing in, say, Bangladesh." Mrs. Millay shuddered sympathetically as she translated, and the Japanese beamed and bowed, then spoke rapidly.

"He says one can learn much," Mrs. Millay translated, "from what foreign countries can do. Even America."

Millicent, glancing at the expression on her husband's face, said brightly: "Well! Let's not let this day go to waste. What shall we do next?" At once she got the same answers from the children: "Old cars!" "Animals!" "No," whined Baby Louisa, "I wanna see the stiffs!"

Mr. Katsubishi whispered something in staccato Japanese to Mrs. Millay, who turned hesitantly to Millicent Baxter. "One doesn't wish to intrude," she said, "but if you are in fact going to see the Hall of Life and Death as your daughter suggests ... well, we don't seem to be able to find the rest of our tour group, you see, and we would like to go there. After all, it is the theme center for the entire fair, as you might say—"

"Why, of course," said Millicent warmly, "we'd be real delighted to have the company of you and Mr. Kats— Kats—"

"Katsubishi!" he supplied, bowing deeply and showing all of his teeth in a smile, and they all seven set off for the Hall of Life and Death, with little Louisa delightedly leading the way.

The hall was a low, white marble structure across the greensward from the Cenotaph, happy picnicking families on the green gay pavilions all around, ice-cream vendors chanting along the roadways, and a circus parade — horses and a giraffe and even an elephant — winding along the main avenue with a band leading them, diddley-boom, diddley-boom, diddley-bang! bang! bang! — all noise, and color, and excitement. But as soon as they were within the hall they were in another world. The Hall of Life and Death was the only free exhibit at the fair — even the rest rooms were not free. The crowds that moved through the hall were huge. But they were also reverential. As you came in you found yourself in a great domed entrance pavilion, almost bare except for seventy-five raised platforms, each spotlighted from a concealed source, each surrounded by an air curtain of gentle drafts. At the time the Baxters came in more than sixty of the platforms were already occupied with silent, lifeless forms of those who had passed on at the fair that day. A sweet-faced child here, an elderly woman there; there, side by side, a young pair of newlyweds. Randolph Baxter looked for and found the tall, smiling black man who had died in the line before him. He was smiling no longer, but his face was in repose and almost joyous, it seemed. "He's at peace now," Millicent whispered, touching her husband's arm,

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and he nodded. He didn't want to speak out loud in this solemn hall, where the whisper of organ music was barely audible above the gentle hiss of chilled air curtains that wafted past every deceased. Hardly anyone in the great crowd spoke. The visitors lingered at each of the occupied biers; but then, as they moved toward the back of the chamber, they didn't linger. Some didn't even look, for every tourist at the fair could not help thinking, as he passed an empty platform, that before the fair closed that night it would be occupied ... by someone.

But the Rotunda of Those Who Have Gone Before was only the anteroom to the many inspiring displays the hall had to offer. Even the children were fascinated. Young Simon stood entranced before the great Timepiece of Living and Dying, watching the hands revolve swiftly to show how many were born and how many died in each minute, with the bottom line always showing a few more persons alive in every minute despite everything the government and the efforts of patriotic citizens could do — but he was more interested, really, in the mechanism of the thing than in the facts it displayed. Millicent Baxter and Mrs. Millay were really thrilled by the display of opulent caskets and cerements, and Ralph Baxter proud to point out to Mr. Katsubishi the working model of a crematorium, with all of its escaping gases trapped and converted into valuable organic feedstocks. And the girls, Emma and Louisa, stood hand in hand for a long time, shuddering happily as they gazed at the refrigerated display cases that showed a hideous four-month embryo next to the corpse of a fat, pretty two-year-old. Emma moved to put her arm around her mother and whispered, "Mommy, I'm *so* grateful you didn't abort me." And Millicent Baxter fought back a quick and tender tear.

"I'd never let you die looking like *that*," she assured her daughter, and they clung together for a long moment. But Randolph Baxter was becoming noticeably ill at ease. When they finally left the Hall of Life and Death, his wife took him aside and asked in concern, "Is something the matter, hon?"

He shrugged irritably at the foreigners, who were talking together in fast, low-toned Japanese. "Just look at their faces," he complained. And indeed both Mr. Katsubishi and Mrs. Millay's expressions seemed to show more revulsion than respect.

Millicent followed her husband's eyes and sighed — there was a little annoyance in the sigh, too. "They're not Americans," she reminded her husband. "I guess they just don't understand." She smiled distantly at the foreign pair, and then looked around at her offspring. "Well, children, who wants to come with me to the washrooms, so we can get ready for the big fireworks?"

They all did, even Randolph, but he felt a need stronger than the urging

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of his bladder. He remained behind with the foreigners. "Excuse me," he said, somewhat formally, "but may I ask what you thought of the exhibit?"

Mrs. Millay glanced at the Japanese. "Well, it was most interesting," she said vaguely. "One doesn't wish to criticize, of course—" And she stopped there.

"No, no, please go on," Randolph encouraged.

She said, "I must say it did seem odd to, well, *glorify* death in that way."

Randolph Baxter smiled, and tried to make it a forgiving smile, though he could feel that he was upset. He said, "Perhaps you miss the point of the Hall of Life and Death — in fact, of the whole Lottery Fair. You see, some of the greatest minds in America have worked on this problem of surplus population — think tanks and government agencies — why, three universities helped design this fair. Every bit of it is scientifically planned. To begin with, it's absolutely free."

Mrs. Millay left off her rapid-fire, sotto voce Japanese translation to ask, "You mean, free as far as money is concerned?"

"Yes, exactly. Of course, one takes a small chance at every ticket window, and in that sense there is a price for everything. A very carefully computed price, Mrs. Millay, for every hot dog, every show, every ride. To get into the fair in the first place, for instance, costs one decimill — that's 1% of a .0001 probability of receiving a lethal injection from the ticket cuff. Now, that's not much of a risk, is it?" he smiled. "And of course it's absolutely painless, too. As you can see by just looking at the ones who have given their lives inside."

Mr. Katsubishi, listening intently to Mrs. Millay's translation in his ear, pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully. Mrs. Millay said brightly, "Well, we all have our own little national traits, don't we?"

"Now, really, Mrs. Millay," said Randolph Baxter, smiling with an effort, "please try to understand. Everything is quite fair. Some things are practically free, like the park benches and the rest rooms and so on; why, you could use some of them as much as a million times before, you know, your number would come up. Or you can get a first-class meal in the Cenotaph for just about a whole millipoint. But even that means you can do it a thousand times, on the average."

Mr. Katsubishi listened to the end of Mrs. Millay's translation, and then struggled to get out a couple of English words. "Not — us," he managed, pointing to himself and Mrs. Millay.

"Certainly not," Baxter agreed. "you're foreign tourists. So you buy your tickets in your own countries for cash, and of course you don't have to risk your lives. It wouldn't help the American population problem much if you did, would it?" he smiled. "And your tour money helps pay the cost

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of the fair. But the important thing to remember is that the Lottery Fair is entirely voluntary. No one has to come. Of course," he admitted, with a self-deprecatory grin, "I have to admit that I really like the job lotteries. I guess I'm just a gambler at heart, and when you've spent as much time on welfare as Mrs. Baxter and I have, those big jobs are just hard to resist! And they're better here than at the regular city raffles."

Mrs. Millay cleared her throat. Good manners competed with obstinacy in her expression. "Really, Mr. Baxter," she said, "Mr. Katsubishi and I understand that — heavens, we've had to do things in our own countries! We certainly don't mean to criticize yours. What's hard to understand, I suppose, is, actually, that fetus." She searched his face with her eyes, looking for understanding. "It just seems strange. I mean, that you'd prefer to see a child born and then perhaps die in a lottery than to abort him ahead of time."

Mr. Baxter did his very best to maintain a pleasant expression, but knew he was failing. "It's a difference in our national philosophies, I guess." he said. "See, we don't go in for your so-called 'birth control' here. No abortion. No contraception. We accept the gift of life when it is given. We believe that every human being, from the moment of conception on, has a right to a life — although," he added, "not necessarily a *long* one." He eyed the abashed foreigners sternly for a moment, then relented. "Well," he said, glancing at his watch, "I wonder where my family can be? They'll miss the fireworks if they don't get back. I bet Mrs. Baxter's gone and let the children pick out souvenirs — the little dickenses have been after us about them all day. Anyway, Mrs. Millay, Mr. Katsubishi, it's been a real pleasure meeting the two of you and having this chance to exchange views—"

But he broke off, suddenly alarmed by the expression on Mr. Katsubishi's face as the man looked past him. "What's the matter?" he demanded roughly.

And then he turned, and did not need an answer. The answer was written on the strained, haggard, tear-streaked face of his wife as she ran despairingly toward him, carrying in her hands a plastic cap, a paperweight, and a helium-filled balloon in the shape of a pig's head, but without Emma and without Simon and even without little Louisa.

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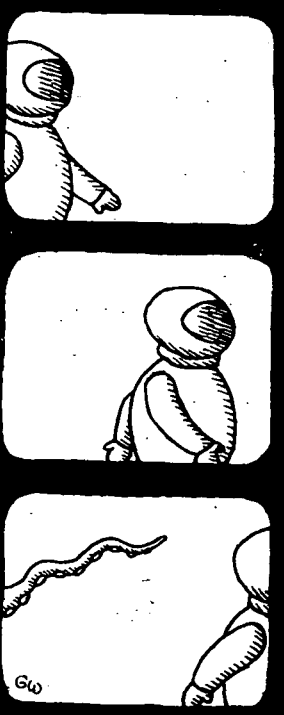
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

JADED JEDI

As I write, *Return of the Jedi* has been open a few days and is taking a pounding from the critics, and to a lesser degree, from the public. Even some of those members of the latter that are enthusiastic seem a bit forced, which might be defensiveness in the face of opposition or could be loyalty covering unadmitted disappointment. All in all, while there's no way that the movie will lose money, and most people who see it will have an unanalytical and perfectly good time — which is what it's all about — the bloom is off the rose. Why, one wonders.

You can easily dismiss the mainstream critics, many of whose reviews had something of the air of "This *Star Wars* thing has been too successful, so let's git 'em!" But even aside from that, I think there is some cause for disappointment, though it pains me infinitely to say so; I've been a staunch supporter from the first extraordinary prerelease screening of SW (and before, for that matter, having been privy to production designs and a run down of the plot — longtime readers will remember my making very untypical optimistic noises before it opened).

Return of the Jedi is an immensely enjoyable movie — let's get that straight right off the bat. If the rest of this piece is devoted to reservations, it's an exploration of the phenomenon of disenchantment as much as anything, and the fact that a high standard

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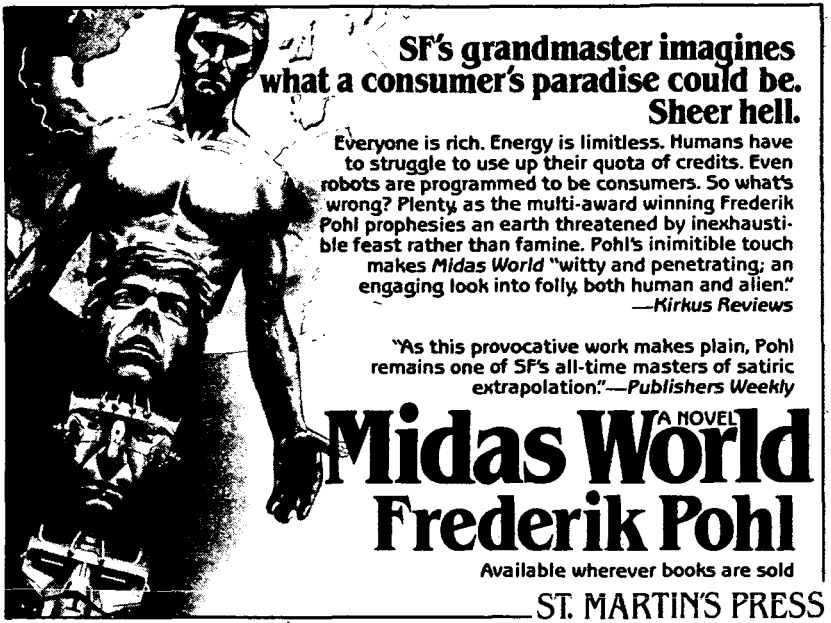
SF's grandmaster imagines what a consumer's paradise could be. Sheer hell.
Everyone is rich. Energy is limitless. Humans have to struggle to use up their quota of credits. Even robots are programmed to be consumers. So what's wrong? Plenty, as the multi-award winning Frederik Pohl prophesies an earth threatened by inexhaustible feast rather than famine. Pohl's inimitible touch makes Midas World "witty and penetrating; an engaging look into folly, both human and alien."
—Kirkus Reviews
"As this provocative work makes plain, Pohl remains one of SF's all-time masters of satiric extrapolation."—Publishers Weekly
A NOVEL
Midas World
Frederik Pohl
Available wherever books are sold
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was set that wasn't met. The factors are several; the lesser ones to do with the film itself, the greater to do with its place as the third of a trilogy.

If *Jedi* had been the first movie of the three (obviously without its specific wind-up-the-plot elements), it probably would have been greeted ecstatically. The races through the Endorian forests alone are sensational enough for any three movies. *But* ...

The aliens are looking more like Muppets and less like convincing extraterrestrials (Muppets are great in their place, but mixing too thoroughly with realism is dangerous to one's belief). The tech special effects are beginning to get repetitious. The humans are trying their damndest, but still act as if they're tired of being upstaged by effects (except for Carrie Fisher, as feisty as ever). Harrison Ford, in particular, is way off in his timing and comes across like James Garner with sleeping sickness; his presumably jaunty wisecracks just sort of lie there. All this may be the fault of the new director, Richard Marquand; like the actors, he seems to have given up early in the competition with everything else that's going on (presumably he had little to do with the technical end), and the dramatic aspects are flaccid, despite all the thunderous revelations and two — count 'em two — major death scenes.

And on a subtler level, one of the major wonders of *Star Wars* was its absolute originality (for film, let's emphasize). You didn't feel it was aimed

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at kids, or adults, or science fiction fans, or anybody in particular; it was one person's vision of what he wanted to see on screen. With the spectacular success of the first two films, in the intervening years the *Star Wars* phenomenon has created its own audience to aim at. With *Jedi*, I kept feeling somebody back there saying, "This is what *they* are going to want" or "*They* will be disappointed if we don't put in..."; there's very little of that joyous spontaneity that was such a revelation to begin with.

This was certainly evident with the Ewoks; obviously no s/f film these days is complete without something cute and cuddly, and so we are given *hordes* of cute and cuddly. (The younger viewers who also read — there *are* a few — are of course making reference to Piper's Little Fuzzies; those of us with a longer view are even more reminded of the Hokas, heroes of a series of wonderful stories by Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson, particularly as pictured by Edd Cartier.)

Even so, *Return of the Jedi* is still head and shoulders above most s/f films; the complaints registered above, you notice, are using the other Lucas films as standards, *not Alien* or *Invasion of the Saucer Men*.

The biggest disappointment of all, though, is that *Return of the Jedi* isn't a finale. What was needed was a thunderous final movement of a three movement symphony, a climax that would make the other movements, in retrospect, seem like mere prelude, no matter how epic they appeared at first showing. That is absolutely necessary to the trilogy, whether in music, novels, or movies, and it didn't happen here.

Oh, sure, all the plot elements are tied up; happy endings, lovers together, villains dead or regenerated (or both, in the case of Darth Vader). But a three-part piece must have three separate sections that have their own distinctiveness — that then add up to a whole greater than those parts. *This* is where I think *Jedi* lets us down, where *The Empire Strikes Back* didn't. That one had its own flavor, primarily derived from the introduction of Yoda; a new gentler quality was added to the saga. Perhaps it was thought that the dramatic elements would give the third its own individual power; if so, it didn't work, as noted above. And the repetition of the Death Star idea was no help.

To be absolutely sure of this, of course, one will have to wait and see all three in one sitting, as it were. In the meantime, if you were one of those with a nagging sense of disappointment, I'll bet a Pepperidge Farm Jedi cookie that's the reason.

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Joe Haldeman, author of THE FOREVER WAR, MINDBRIDGE and WORLDS, offers a fresh and entertaining fantasy about three men caught in the middle of the U. S. - Mexico war over Texas in the 1840's.

Manifest Destiny

BY

JOE HALDEMAN

This is the story of John Leroy Harris, but I doubt that name means much to you unless you're pretty old, especially an old lawman. He's dead anyhow, thirty years now, and nobody left around that could get hurt with this story. The fact is, I would've told it a long time ago, but when I was younger it would have bothered me, worrying about what people would think. Now I just don't care. The hell with it.

I've been on the move ever since I was a lad. At thirteen I put a knife in another boy and didn't wait around to see if he lived, just went down to the river and worked my way to St. Louis, got in some trouble there and wound up in New Orleans a few years later. That's where I came to meet John Harris.

Now you wouldn't tell from his name (he's changed it a few times), but John was pure Spanish blood, as his folks had come from Spain before the Purchase. John was born in Natchitoches in 1815, the year of the Battle of New Orleans. That put him thirteen years older than me, so I guess he was about thirty when we met.

I was working as a greeter, what we called a "bouncer," in Mrs. Carranza's whorehouse down by the docks. Mostly I just sat around and looked big — which I was then, and no fat, but sometimes I did have to calm down a customer or maybe throw him out, and I kept under my weskit a Starr pepperbox derringer in case of real trouble. It was by using this weapon that I made the acquaintance of John Harris.

Harris had been in the bar a few times, often enough for me to notice him, but to my knowledge he never put the boots to any of the women.

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Didn't have to pay for it, I guess; he was a handsome cuss, more than six feet tall, slender, with this kind of tragic look that women seem to like. Anyhow it was a raw rainy night in November, cold the way noplace else quite gets cold, and this customer comes downstairs complaining that the girl didn't do what he had asked her to, and he wasn't going to pay the extra. The kate come down right behind him and told what it was, and that she had too done it, and he hadn't said nothing about it when they started, and you can take my word for it that it was something nasty.

Well, we had some words about that and he tried to walk out without paying, so I sort of brought him back in and emptied out his pockets. He didn't even have the price of a drink on him (he'd given Mrs. Carranza the two dollars, but that didn't get you anything fancy). He did have a nice overcoat, though, so I took that from him and escorted him out into the rain headfirst.

What happened was about ten or fifteen minutes later he barges back in, looking like a drowned dog but with a Navy Colt in each hand. He got off two shots before I blew his brains out (pepperbox isn't much of a pistol, but he wasn't four yards away), and a split second later another bullet takes him in the lungs. I turned around and everybody was on the floor or behind the bar but John Harris, who was still perched on a stool looking sort of interested and putting some kind of foreign revolver back into his pocket.

The cops came soon enough but there was no trouble, not with forty witnesses, except for what to do with the dead meat. He didn't have any papers and Mrs. Carranza didn't want to pay the city for the burial. I was for just taking it out back and dropping it in the water, but they said that was against the law and unsanitary. John Harris said he had a wagon and come morning he'd take care of the matter. He signed a paper and that satisfied them.

First light Harris showed up in a fancy landau. Me and the driver, an old black, we wrestled the wrapped-up corpse into the back of the carriage. Harris asked me to come along and I did.

We just went east a little ways and rolled the damned thing into a bayou, let the gators take it. Then the driver smoked a pipe while Harris and me talked for a while.

Now he did have the damnedest way of talking. His English was like nothing you ever heard — Spanish his mother tongue and then he learned most of his English in Australia — but that's not what I really mean. I mean that if he wanted you to do something and you didn't want to do it, you had best put your fingers in your ears and start walking away. That son of a gun could sell water to a drowning man.

He started out asking me questions about myself, and eventually we got to

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talking about politics. Turns out we both felt about the same way toward the U.S. government, which is to say the hell with it. Harris wasn't even really a citizen and I myself didn't exist. For good reasons there was a death certificate on me in St. Louis, and I had a couple of different sets of papers a fellow on Bourbon Street printed up for me.

Harris had noticed that I spoke some Spanish — Mrs. Carranza was Mexican and so were most of her kates — and he got around to asking whether I'd like to take a little trip to Mexico. I told him that sounded like a really bad idea.

This was late 1844, and that damned Polk had just been elected promising to annex Texas. The Mexicans had been skirmishing with Texas for years and they said it would be war if they got statehood. The man in charge was that one-legged crazy greaser Santa Anna, who'd been such a gentleman at the Alamo some years before. I didn't fancy being a gringo stuck in that country when the shooting started.

Well, Harris said I hadn't thought it through. It was true there was going to be a war, he said, but the trick was to get in there early enough to profit from it. He asked whether I'd be interested in getting ten percent of ten thousand dollars. I told him I could feel my courage returning.

Turns out Harris had joined the army a couple of years before and got himself into the quartermaster business, the ones who shuffle supplies back and forth. He had managed to slide five hundred rifles and a big batch of ammunition into a warehouse in New Orleans. The army thought they were stored in Kentucky, and the man who rented out the warehouse thought they were farming tools. Harris got himself discharged from the army and eventually got in touch with one General Parrodi, in Tampico. Parrodi agreed to buy the weapons, and pay for them in gold.

The catch was that Parrodi also wanted the services of three Americans, not to fight but to serve as "interpreters," that is to say spies, for as long as the war lasted. We would be given Mexican citizenship if we wanted it, and a land grant, but for our own protection we'd be treated as prisoners while the war was going on. (Part of the deal was that we would eavesdrop on other prisoners.) Harris showed me a contract that spelled all of this out, but I couldn't read Spanish back then. Anyhow, I was no more inclined to trust Mexicans in such matters than I was Americans, but as I say, Harris could sell booze to a Baptist.

The third American was none other than the old buck who was driving, a runaway slave from Florida name of Washington. He had grown up with Spanish masters, and not as a field hand, but some kind of butler. He had more learning than I did and could speak Spanish like a grandee. In Mexico, of course, there wasn't any slavery,

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and he reckoned a nigger with gold and land was just as good as anybody else with gold and land.

Looking back I can see why Washington was willing to take the risk, but I was a damned fool to do it. I was no roughneck, but I'd seen some violence in my seventeen years; that citizen we'd dumped in the bayou wasn't the first man I had to kill. You'd think I'd know better than to put myself in the middle of a war. Guess I was too young to take dying seriously — a thousand dollars was real money back then.

We went back into town and Harris took me to the warehouse. What he had was fifty long blue boxes stenciled with the name of a hardware outfit, and each one had ten Hall rifles, brand-new in a mixture of grease and sawdust.

(This is why the Mexicans were right enthusiastic. The Hall was a flintlock, at least these were, but it was also a breechloader. The old muzzle-loaders that most soldiers used, Mexican and American, took thirteen separate steps to reload. Miss one step and it can take your face off. Also the Hall used interchangeable parts, which meant you didn't have to find a smith when it needed repairing.)

Back at the house I told Mrs. Carranza I had to quit, and would get a new boy for her. Then Harris and me had a steak and put ourselves outside of a bottle of sherry, while he filled me in on the details of the operation. He'd put considerable money into buying discretion from a dockmaster and a Brit packet captain. This packet was about the only boat that put into Tampico from New Orleans on anything like a regular basis, and Harris had the idea that smuggling guns wasn't too much of a novelty to the captain. The next Friday night we were going to load the stuff onto the packet, bound south the next morning.

The loading went smooth as cream, and the next day we boarded the boat as paying passengers, Washington supposedly belonging to Harris and coming along as his manservant. At first it was right pleasant, slipping through a hundred or so miles of bayou country. But the Gulf of Mexico ain't the Mississippi, and after a couple of hours of that I was sick from my teeth to my toenails, and stayed that way for days. Captain gave me a mixture of brandy and seawater, which like to killed me. Harris thought that was funny, but the humor wore off some when we put into Tampico and him and Washington had to offload the cargo without much help from me.

We went on up to Parrodi's villa and found we might be out of a job. While we were on that boat there had been a revolution. Santa Anna got kicked out, having pretty much emptied the treasury, and now the *moderado* Herrera was in charge. Parrodi and Harris argued for a long time. The Mexican was willing to pay for the rifles, but he figured that half the

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money was for our service as spies.

They finally settled on eight thousand, but only if we would stay in Tampico for the next eighteen months, in case a war did start. Washington and I would get fifty dollars a month for walking around money.

The next year was the most boring year of my life. After New Orleans, there's just not much you could say about Tampico. It's an old city but also brand-new. Pirates burnt it to the ground a couple of hundred years ago. Santa Anna had it rebuilt in the twenties, and it was still not much more than a garrison town when we were there. Most of the houses were wood, imported from the States and nailed together. Couple of whorehouses and cantinas downtown, and you can bet I spent a lot of time and fifty bucks a month down there.

Elsewhere, things started to happen in the spring. The U.S. Congress went along with Polk and voted to annex Texas, and Mexico broke off diplomatic relations, and declared war, but Washington didn't seem to notice. Herrera must have his hands full with the Carmelite Revolution, though things were quiet in Tampico for the rest of the year.

I got to know Harris pretty well. He spent a lot of time teaching me to read and write Spanish — though I never could talk it without sounding like a gringo — and I can tell you he was hellfire as a teacher. The teachers used to whip me when I was a kid, but that was easier to take than Harris's tongue. He could make you feel about six inches tall. Then a few minutes later you get a verb right and you're a hero.

We'd also go into the woods outside of town and practice with the pistol and rifle. He could do some awesome things with a Colt. He taught me how to throw a knife and I taught him how to use a lasso.

We got into a kind of routine. I had a room with the Galvez family downtown. I'd get up pretty late mornings and peg away at my Spanish books. About midday Harris would come down (he was staying up at the general's place) and give me my daily dose of sarcasm. Then we'd go down to a cantina and have lunch, usually with Washington. Afternoons, when most of the town napped, we might go riding or shooting in the woods south of town. We kept the Galvez family in meat that way, getting a boar or a deer every now and then. Since I was once a farm boy I knew how to dress out animals and how to smoke or salt meat to keep it. Señora Galvez always deducted the value of the meat from my rent.

Harris spent most evenings up at the villa with the officers, but sometimes he'd come down to the cantinas with me and drink pulque with the off-duty soldiers, or sometimes just sit around the kitchen table with the Galvez family. They took a shine to him.

He was really taken with old Doña Dolores, who claimed to be over a

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hundred years old and from Spain. She wasn't a relative but had been a friend of Señora Galvez's grandmother. Anyhow, she also claimed to be witch, a white witch who could heal and predict things and so forth.

If Harris had a weakness it was superstition. He always wore a lucky gold piece on a thong around his neck and carried an Indian finger bone in his pocket. And though he could swear the bark off a tree, he never used the names of God or Jesus, and when somebody else did he always crossed the fingers of his left hand. Even though he laughed at religion and I never saw him go to church. So he was always asking Dolores about this or that, and always ready to listen to her stories. She only had a couple dozen, but they kept changing.

Now I never thought that Dolores wasn't straight. If she wasn't a witch she sure as hell *thought* she was. And she did heal, with her hands and with herbs she picked in the woods. She healed me of the grippe and a rash I picked up from one of the girls. But I didn't believe in spells or fortune-telling, not then. When anybody's eighteen he's a smart aleck and knows just how the world works. I'm not so sure anymore, especially with what happened to Harris.

Every week or so we got a newspaper from Monterrey. By January I could read it pretty well, and looking back I guess you could say it was that month the war really started, though it would be spring before any shots were fired. What happened was that Polk sent some four thousand troops into what he claimed was part of Texas. The general was Zach Taylor, who was going to be such a crackerjack president a few years later. Herrera seemed about to make a deal with the States, so he got booted out and they put Paredes in office. The Mexicans started building up an army in Monterrey, and it looked like we were going to earn our money after all.

I was starting to get a little nervous. You didn't have to look too hard at the map to see that Tampico was going to get trouble. If the U.S. wanted to take Mexico City they had the choice of marching over a couple thousand miles of mountain and desert, or taking a Gulf port and only marching a couple hundred miles. Tampico and Vera Cruz were about the same distance from Mexico City, but Vera Cruz had a fort protecting it. All we had was us.

Since our Civil War nobody remembers much about the Mexican one. Well, the Mexicans were in such bad shape even Taylor could beat them. The country was flat broke. Their regular army had more officers than men. They drafted illiterate Indians and mestizos and herded them by the thousands into certain death from American artillery and cavalry — some of them had never even fired a shot before they got into battle. That was Santa Anna economizing. He would've lost that war even if Mexico

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had all the armies of Europe combined.

Now we thought we'd heard the last of that one-legged son of a bitch. When we got to Tampico he'd just barely got out of Mexico with his skin, exiled to Cuba. But he got back, and he damn near killed me and Harris with his stupidity. And he did kill Washington, just as sure as if he pulled the trigger.

In May of that year Taylor had a showdown up by Matamoros, and Polk got around to declaring war. We started seeing American boats all the time, going back and forth out of cannon range, blockading the port. It was nervous making. The soldiers were fit to be tied — but old Dolores said there was nothing to worry about. Said she'd be able to "see" if there was going to be fighting, and she didn't see anything. This gave Harris considerable more comfort than it gave me.

What we didn't find out until after the war was that Santa Anna got in touch with the United States and said he could get Mexico to end the war, give up Texas and California, and for all I know the moon. Polk, who must have been one fine judge of character, gave Santa Anna safe passage through the American blockade.

Well, in the meantime the people in Mexico had gotten a belly full of Paredes, who had a way of having people he disagreed with shot, and they kicked him out. Santa Anna limped in and they made him president. He double-crossed Polk, got together twenty thousand soldiers, and got ready to head north and kick the stuffing out of the gringos.

Now you figure this one out. The Mexicans intercepted a message to the American naval commander, telling him to take Tampico. What did Santa Anna do? He ordered Parrodi to desert the place.

I was all for the idea myself, and so were a lot of the soldiers, but the general was considerable upset. It was bad enough that he couldn't stand and fight, but on top of that he didn't have near enough mules and horses to move out all the supplies they had stockpiled there.

Well, we sure as hell were going to take care of *our* supplies. Harris had a buckboard and we'd put a false bottom under the seat. Put our money in there and the papers that identified us as loyal Americans. In another place we put our Mexican citizenship papers and the deeds to our land grant, up in the Mesilla Valley. Then we drew weapons from the armory and got ready to go up to San Luis Potosí with a detachment that was leaving in the morning.

I was glad we wouldn't be in Tampico when the American fleet rolled in, but then San Luis Potosí didn't sound like any picnic, either. Santa Anna was going to be getting his army together, and it was only a few hundred miles from Taylor's army. One or the other of them would probably want to do something with all those soldiers.

Harris was jumpy. He kept putting

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his hand in his pocket to rub that Indain bone. That night, before he went up to the villa, he came to the hacienda with me, and told Dolores he's had a bad premonition about going to San Luis Potosí. He asked her to tell his fortune and tell him flat out if he was going to die. She said she couldn't tell a man when he was going to die, even when she saw it. If she did her powers would go away. But she would tell his fortune.

She studied his hands for a long time without saying anything. Then she took out a shabby deck of cards and dealt some out in front of him, face up. (They weren't regular cards. They had faded pictures of devils and skeletons and so forth.)

Finally she told him not to worry. He was not going to die in San Luis. In fact, he would not die in Mexico at all. That was plain.

Now I wish I had Harris's talent for shucking off worries. He laughed and gave her a gold real, and then he dragged me down to the cantina, where we proceeded to get more than half corned on that damned pulque, on his money. We carried out four big jars of the stuff, which was a good thing. I had to drink half one in the morning before I could see through the agony. That stuff is not good for white men. Ten cents a jug, though.

The trek from Tampico to San Luis took more than a week, with Washington riding in the back of the buckboard and Harris and me taking turns riding and walking. There was about two hundred soldiers in our group, no more used to walking than us, and sometimes they eyed that buckboard. It was hilly country and mostly dry. General Parrodi went on ahead, and we never saw him again. Later on we learned that Santa Anna court-martialed him for desertion, for letting the gringos take Tampico. Fits.

San Luis Potosí looked like a nice little town, but we didn't see too damned much of it. We went to the big camp outside of town. Couldn't find Parrodi, so Harris sniffed around and got us attached to General Pacheco's division. General looked at the contract and more or less told us to pitch a tent and stay out of the way.

You never seen so many greasers in your life. Four thousand who Taylor'd kicked out of Monterrrey, and about twenty thousand more who might or might not have known which end the bullet comes out of.

We got a good taste of what they call *santanismo* now. Santa Anna had all these raw boys, and what did he do to get them in shape for a fight? He had them dress up and do parades, while he rode back and forth on his goddamned horse. Week after week. A lot of the boys ran away, and I can't say I blame them. They didn't have a thousand dollars and a ranch to hang around for.

We weren't the only Americans there. A whole bunch of Taylor's men, more than two hundred, had absquat-

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ulated before he took Monterrrey. The Mexicans gave them land grants, too. They were called the "San Pats," the San Patricio battalion. We were told not to go near them, so that none of them would know we weren't actually prisoners.

After a couple of months of this, we found out what the deal was going to be. Taylor'd had most of his men taken away from him, sent down to Tampico to join up with another bunch that was headed for Mexico City. What Santa Anna said we were going to do was go north and wipe out Taylor, then come back and defend the city. The first part did look possible, since we had four or five men for every one of Taylor's. Me and Harris and Washington decided we'd wait and see how the first battle went. We might want to keep going north.

It took three days to get all the men on the road. Not just men, either; a lot of them had their wives and children along, carrying food and water and firewood. It was going to be three hundred miles, most of it barren. We saw Santa Anna go by, in a carriage drawn by eight white mules, followed by a couple carriages of whores. If I had the second sight Dolores claimed to have, I might've spent a pill on that son of a bitch. I still wonder why nobody ever did.

It wasn't easy even for us, with plenty of water and food. Then the twelfth day a norther came in, the temperature dropped way below freezing, and a goddamned blizzard came up. We started passing dead people by the side of the road. Then Washington lost his voice, coughed blood for a while, and died. We carried him till night and then buried him. Had to get a pick from the engineers to get through the frozen ground. I never cried over a nigger before or since. Nor a white man, now I think of it. Could be it was the wind. Harris and me split his share of the gold and burnt his papers.

It warmed up just enough for the snow to turn to cold drizzle, and it rained for two days straight. Then it stopped and the desert sucked up the water, and we marched the rest of the way through dust and heat. Probably a fourth of Santa Anna's men died or deserted before we got to where Zach Taylor was waiting, outside of Saltillo in a gulch called Buena Vista. Still, we had them so outnumbered we should've run them into the ground. Instead, Santa Anna spent the first whole day fiddling, shuffling troops around. He didn't even do that right. Any shavetail would've outflanked and surrounded Taylor's men. He left all their right flank open, as well as the road to Saltillo. I heard a little shooting but nothing much happened.

It turned cold and windy that night. Seemed like I just got to sleep when drums woke me up — American drums, sounding reveille, that's how close we were. Then a goddamned band, playing "Hail Columbia." Both Taylor and Santa Anna belonged on a

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goddamned parade ground.

A private came around with chains and leg-irons, said he was supposed to lock us to the buckboard. For twenty dollars he accidentally dropped the key. I wonder if he ever lived to spend it. It was going to be a bad bloody day for the Mexicans.

We settled in behind the buckboard and watched about a thousand cavalrymen charge by, lances and machetes and blood in their eye, going around behind the hills to our right. Then the shooting started, and it didn't let up for a long time.

To our left, they ordered General Blanco's division to march into the gulch column-style, where the Americans were set up with field artillery. Cannister and grapeshot cut them to bloody rags. Then Santa Anna rode over and ordered Pacheco's division to go for the gulch. I was as glad to be chained to a buckboard. They walked right into it, balls but no brains, and I guess maybe half of them eventually made it back. Said they'd killed a lot of gringos, but I didn't notice it getting any quieter.

I watched all this from well behind the buckboard. Every now and then a stray bullet would spray up dirt or plow into the wood. Harris just stood out in the open, as far from cover as the chain would let him, standing there with his hands in his pockets. A bullet or a piece of grape knocked off his hat. He dusted it off and wiggled his finger at me through the hole, put it back on his head and put his hands back in his pockets. I reminded him that if he got killed I'd take all the gold. He just smiled. He was absolutely not going to die in Mexico. I told him even if I *believed* in that bunkum I'd want to give it a little help. A goddamned cannonball whooshed by and he didn't blink, just kept smiling. It exploded some ways behind us, and I got a little piece in the part that goes over the fence last, which isn't funny as it might sound, since it was going to be month before I could sit proper.

Harris did leave off being a target long enough to do some doctoring on me. While he was doing that a whole bunch of troops went by behind us, following the way the cavalry went earlier, and they had some nice comments for me. I even got to show my bare butt to Santa Anna, which I guess not too many people do and live.

We heard a lot of noise from their direction but couldn't see anything because of the hills. We also stopped getting shot at, which was all right by me, though Harris seemed bored.

Since then I've read everything I could get my hands on about that battle. The Mexicans had fifteen hundred to two thousand men killed and wounded at Buena Vista, thanks to Santa Anna's generaling. The Americans were unprepared and outnumbered, and some of them actually broke and ran — where even the American accounts admit that the greasers were all-fired brave. If we'd

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had a real general, a real battle plan, we would've walked right over the gringos.

And you can't help but wonder what would've happened. What if Zach Taylor'd been killed, or even just lost the battle? Who would the Whigs have run for president, who would have been elected? Maybe somebody who didn't want a War Between the States.

Anyhow, the noise died down and the soldiers straggled back. It's a funny thing about soldiering. After all the bloody fighting, once it was clear who had won, the Americans came out on the battlefield and shared their food and water with us, and gave some medical help. But that night was terrible with the sounds of the dying, and the retreat was pure hell. I was for heading north, forget the land grant, but of course Harris knew that he was going to make it through no matter what.

Well, we were lucky. When we got to San Luis an aide to Pacheco decided we weren't being too useful as spies, so we got assigned to a hospital detail, and stayed there while others went south with Santa Anna to get blown apart at Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec. A few months later the war was over and Santa Anna was back in exile — which was temporary, as usual. That son of a bitch was president eleven times.

Now this is where the story gets strange, and if somebody else was telling it I might call him a liar. You're welcome to that opinion, but anyhow it's true.

We had more than a thousand acres up in Mesilla, too much to farm by ourselves, so we passed out some handbills and got a couple dozen ex-soldiers to come along with their families, to be sort of tenant farmers. It was to be a fifty-fifty split, which looked pretty good on the surface, because although it wasn't exactly Kansas the soil was supposedly good enough for maize and agave, the plant that pulque was made from. What they didn't tell us about was the Apaches. But I don't want to get ahead of the story.

Now the Mesilla Valley looked really good on the map. It had a good river and it was close to the new American border. I still had my American citizenship papers and sort of liked the idea of being only a couple of days away in case trouble started. Anyhow, we got outfitted in San Luis and headed our little wagon train north by northwest. More than a thousand miles through Durango and Chihuahua. It was rough going, just as dry as hell, but we knew that ahead of time, and at least there was nobody shooting at us. All we lost was a few mules and one wagon, no people.

Our grants were outside of the little town of Tubac, near the silver mines at Cerro Colorado. There was some irrigation but not nearly enough, so we planted a small crop and worked like beavers digging ditches so that the next

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crop could be big enough for profit.

Or should I say the greasers and me worked like beavers. Harris turned out not to have too much appetite for that kind of thing. Well, if I had eight thousand in gold I'd probably take a couple years' vacation myself. He didn't even stay on the grant, though. Rented a little house in town and proceeded to make himself a reputation.

Of course Harris had always been handy with a pistol and a knife, but he also used to have a healthy respect for what they could do to you. Now he took to picking fights — or actually, getting people so riled that they picked fights with him. With his tongue that was easy.

And it did look like he was charmed. I don't know how many people he shot and stabbed, without himself getting a scratch. I don't know because I stopped keeping regular company with him after I got myself a nasty stab wound in the thigh, because of his big mouth. We didn't seek each other out after that, but it wasn't such a big town, and I did see him every now and then. And I was with him the night he died.

There was this cantina in the south part of town where I liked to go, because a couple of Americans, engineers at the mine, did their drinking there. I walked down to it one night and almost went right back out when I heard Harris's voice. He was talking at the bar, fairly quiet but in that sarcastic way of his, in English. Suddenly the big engineer next to him stands up and kicks his stool halfway across the room, and at the top of his voice calls Harris something I wouldn't say to the Devil himself. By this time anybody with horse sense was grabbing a piece of the floor, and I got behind the doorjamb myself, but I did see everything that happened.

The big guy reaches into his coat, and suddenly Harris has his Navy Colt in hand. He has that little smile I saw too often. I hear the Colt's hammer snap down and this little "puff" sound. Harris's jaw drops because he knows as well as I do what's happened: bad round, and now there's a bullet jammed in the barrel. He couldn't shoot again even if he had time.

Then the big guy laughs, almost good-natured, and takes careful aim with this little ladies' gun, a .32 I think. He shoots Harris in the arm, evidently to teach him a lesson. Just a graze, doesn't even break a bone. But Harris takes one look at it and his face goes blank and he drops to the floor. Even if you'd never seen a man die, you'd know he was dead by the way he fell.

Now I've told this story to men who were in the Civil War, beside which the Mexican War looks like a Sunday outing, and some of them say that's not hard to believe. You see enough men die and you see everything. One fellow'll get both legs blown off and sit and joke while they sew him up; the next'll get a little scratch and die of the shock. But that

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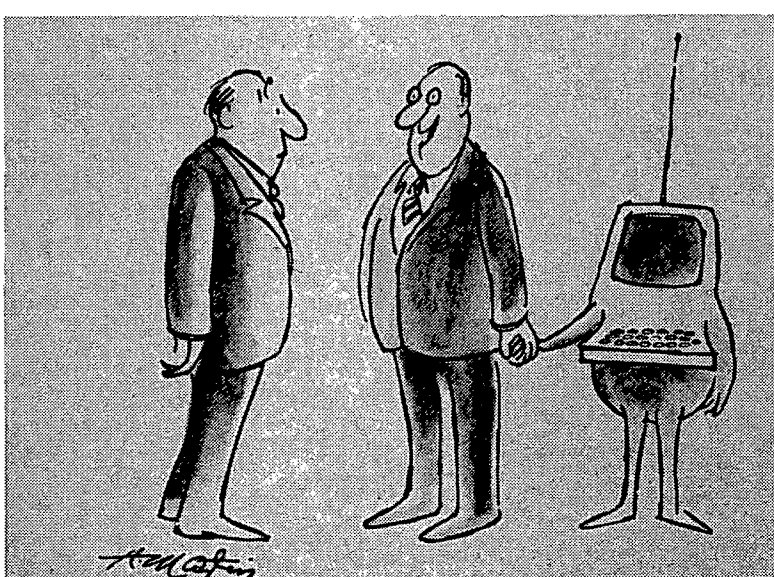
one just doesn't sound like Harris, not before or after Doña Dolores's prediction made him reckless. What signifies to me is the date that Harris died: December 30, 1853.

Earlier that year, Santa Anna had managed to get back into office, for the last time. He did his usual trick of spending all the money he could find. Railroad fellow named James Gadsden showed up and offered to buy a little chunk of northern Mexico, to get the right-of-way for a transcontinental railroad. It was the Mesilla Valley, and Santa Anna signed it over on the thirteenth of December. We didn't know it for a couple of weeks, and the haggling went on till June — but when Harris picked a fight that night, he wasn't on Mexican soil. And you can make of that what you want.

As for me, I only kept farming for a few more years. Around about '57 the Apaches started to get rambunctious, Cochise's gang of murderers. Even if I'd wanted to stay I couldn't've kept any help. Went to California but didn't pan out. Been on the move since, and it suits me. Reckon I'll go almost anyplace except Mexico.

Because old Dolores liked me and she told my fortune many times. I never paid too much attention, but I know if she'd seen the sign that said I wasn't going to die in Mexico, she would've told me, and I would've remembered. Maybe it's all silliness. But I ain't going to be the one to test it.



"Ed, I'd like to introduce you to Walnut II, my personal computer."

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Here is a rare short story from Ted Sturgeon, whose last appearance here was in the 25th anniversary issue (October 1974). Like many Sturgeon stories, it concerns an aspect of love, but it begins with an epidemic...

Not An Affair

BY

THEODORE STURGEON

She cried out: *"I thought I loved him!"* She had cried and cried ever since she had told him, ever since she had *had* to tell him about what had happened; she had cried through all of his anguished demands as to exactly what had happened, cried while she answered him truthfully, instant by instant of that evening and night, the innocent acceptance to cocktails, the acceptance of the ride home, then, then, then, what had happened in the car.

Most of a night, half a day then, the questions, questions shouted, questions sobbed; the "Who was it?" questions, and their chain: "You don't know? How could you not know?"; the "How *could* you?" questions, with their "While I-", "When I—"; and the "At this of all times" chains: "While I sweat there in that rotten warehouse until two in the morning to get us a little extra, to get *you* a little extra," and "When I trusted you, have always trusted you," and "At this of all times, when we have to live apart, sleep apart...."

A love, a wedding, a honeymoon that went on and on for almost a year now; the exciting new job with a civilian firm in a foreign land, building a military base; and the lonely weeks when he went first; and the joy when her application was approved and she, too, could come; and the appalling news that until the housing area was completed they would have to live in bachelor quarters, she in her barracks, he in his, under the stiff-necked regulations of a base commander who went by the book (no cohabitation except in married quarters, and marine guards under strict orders to enforce) — and "at this of all times," the one time when the commandant permitted a military/civilian celebration off the base,

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the one time when they had both been invited and he insisted she go while he rolled up some overtime in the warehouse, the one time she — she — it had happened, and with a stranger. Who was he? She didn't really know. Where was he? Gone, flown away that night on whatever function he had with the company. Or the military. She didn't even know that.

So it came down at last to the apparantly endless chain of demands — "Why? Why? Why did you do it?" — and there was no answer, none, none, for a day and a night and some hours to boot, until at last she cried out: "I thought I loved him!"

The slow door of the ladies' room closed itself on the click-buzz-hum of the big office. Ariadne Guelph passed through the inside door to find her friend May Stern crouched on the settee, hands between knees, slump-shouldered, a portrait of misery. "May, honey — whatever is the matter?"

The younger girl looked up slowly. "Ari. Oh. Ari."

Ariadne sat beside her, put an arm around her. "I heard old Bristle-chin telling somebody over the phone that he can't get any work out of you today, or any sense either. What is it, Maisie? That's not like you."

"In there..." May waved a hand toward the inner room and its row of booths.

"I'll see." She rose and looked inside, returned. "There's no one in there. ... Tell me, dear."

May took Ariadne's hands and looked up at her with wistful eyes. "Ari, last night I — well, I ..."

"Let me guess. It was some guy."

Silently she nodded.

"And you made it with him."

Another nod. A quivering lip.

"Gosh, honey, it happens all the time. Who was it?"

The weeping began. "Th-that's just it. I don't *know!*"

"You were raped!"

"I wish I had been," and she laughed weakly through the tears. "Oh, that's crazy, of course not. What I mean ... I wanted to, I wanted ... him, I just didn't care. And I don't know why. And I don't know *him.*"

"I think," said Ariadne firmly, "that this is just one of those things that can happen. No harm done, and you can forget it."

Little May more or less did, too, until she missed her next period.

Lynn was very happily married. At first she and Jon talked sometimes about having a child — dream stuff, "maybe someday" stuff, but it was never really an issue. And as time went by she became increasingly convinced that it was just something which would never happen. And the pills and all that were such a nuisance; she quite forgot them some of the time, then all of the time.

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Then she had her inexplicable adventure — she who was the least adventurous of women. She and a friend went into a bar — for the friend's thirst, not her own; she just didn't go to bars — and the friend gulped and left because of an appointment, and Lynn, who never gulped, stayed to finish her sipping. Broad daylight, mind you, the middle of the afternoon. And then *he* was there, standing by the little table, sitting across from her, saying things she could no longer remember in a soft, deep voice ... oh, yes, she remembered one thing: "I do not want an affair. I want an experience." And the walk to, to wherever it was, not far, a closed, warm, clean place with a bed ... the walk could not be recalled because of the thick cloud of wanting in which she drifted. And it happened, and she was outside again walking with him, walking without him, and finally home, quite alone, totally bewildered, captured between the truth and disbelief.

By the time Jon got home she had decided not to tell him, and there really was no need to. Lynn was a very composed lady.

Evelyn was not a very composed lady, and she did tell Kevin when he got home; she had to, distraught as she was with astonished self-hatred. Kevin immediately beat the hell out of her. He beat her so badly that she called the police, and when they arrived he stood over her with a new insanity shining in his eyes so brightly that she did as he told her to do; she said to the police that she had been raped, that Kevin had come home to find her in this battered condition. The moment she was alone at the police station she told the sympathetic women of the rape crisis unit what had really happened. So Kevin was arrested and jailed, and Evelyn went for frantic hours to everyone she could reach to gather enough money to bail him out. Shaken and well cooled, he went home with her and lay all night crying in her soothing arms.

A military base hospital is so very male-oriented that the presence of a woman with an obstetric difficulty seems somehow inappropriate, though no one can say why.

After her affair (no, it was not an affair, it was an experience), her husband would not touch her. When she underwent a pregnancy test, which he had stonily demanded, and it came out positive, he touched her even less; he touched her no more with his eyes, his voice.

And when, exactly at the time her next menses were due, she miscarried, he was flooded with joy, and became his old garrulous, affable self; but it was over for her, all over. He sat there in the hospital room with flowers in his hand, showering relieved gladness on a piece of stone, which would not come to life even when he said he forgave her.

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Dr. Gerald McComb McCambridge, head of the heavily funded and prestigious Genetic Research Laboratories, dialed a number and spoke: "Hi, Wacky." Nostalgic collegiate baby-talk: the name was Whickter, which became "Whisky," then "Wicky," and finally "Wicky-wacky," which Professor Dr. Alonzo Frederick Whickter heartily detested; he gave it back: "Oh, hi, Macmac."

"I can look down this wire," said McCambridge without preliminary, "and see past your left shoulder and through that door and into your filing cabinet a folder describing a prepartum female who, having committed whatever it takes to become pregnant, has passed one period and spontaneously aborted on the next."

"You've been peeking," said Whickter.

"I *am* peeking," said McCambridge. "I now read further down the file. This same lady subsequently tests sterile, due to a very slight malformation, or alteration, of the outer membrane of the ovum, rendering it impenetrable."

"How the hell did you know? I have twenty-two like that."

"I have forty-five," said McCambridge, "and I suspect that out there on my secretary's desk are a fair clutch more. But I'm not finished reading over this wire and through that door and into your files." He cleared his throat. "Not a few of these patients are, or need to be, in psychiatric hands to pursue the conviction that they do not know who impregnated them nor how it was accomplished."

"Mac," said Whickter with no trace of banter left in his voice, "what the hell is it — an epidemic?"

McCambridge let silence fill the line.

Whickter drew a shuddering breath. "My God. I think you just said it was."

"You said it."

"How far has it gone?"

McCambridge shrugged, sure that the other man could sense the gesture. "As a general rule, what percentage of cases of any specific disorder show up in my labs or your practice? If you suddenly get five cases of toxic shock syndrome, how many can you estimate are in the general population?"

"I factor with a big number," conceded Whickter. "Of course—"

"Of course what?"

"I'd have to know the epicenters. Five cases in a neighborhood, a city, a seaboard—"

"What do you get from your files?"

"Minneapolis ... South Bend ... (two in South Bend, I think) ... Louisville. Quite a cluster in Louisville. ... It's gone pretty far. Too far."

"London," said McCambridge. "Metz. Casablanca. Capetown. Buenos Aires, Nairobi, and something in Hong Kong that looks very much like it."

"Oh, my God," Whickter said again, and this interested McCam-

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bridge very much; he had heard this expression from Alonzo Whickter perhaps twice since their college days. "You must have had your League of Nations on the prowl."

"Right," said McCambridge. His "League of Nations" was a very special group of graduate students, each as distinct a specimen of the various human subspecies as McCambridge had been able to find. Each kept close contact with his or her racial origins; for his special projects, McCambridge wanted as little dilution as possible.

"Then," said Whickter, "you already knew it was an epidemic."

"Let's say I was wondering if it could be."

"Mac, what shall we do? Call in the press, alert people?"

"The press," said McCambridge, having traveled this course before, "will not need any calling in. When the media become aware of it, they'll come. And right here is where they'll come to. Calling in the press before you have a diagnosis, and especially before you can point at a treatment, is pushing a quite unnecessary panic button. Tell me: have any of your patients suffered permanently, aside from emotional trauma?"

"Not really. Not so far."

"All right. Now here is something you, as dean of a school of gynecology and obstetrics, can do, something I'd rather not stir up from this source. I need data on unaffected carriers."

"Like Typhoid Mary."

"Not like Typhoid Mary. Like men. Go from the hypothesis that if a man had contact with a woman who has had this — what? — plague, and then has contact with another woman, what chance has that second woman got to contact the disease?"

"I think I can get you some data."

"I think you can. And if you can find out at what stage the male picks up the bug — that is, if the contact occurs during the pregnancy or after the miscarriage, spontaneous aborting, whatever you call it — that would be valuable."

"I'll try."

McCambridge said very quietly. "It's kind of urgent, Alonzo."

"I'll do it."

"I know you will. Good night."

All night long Dr. McCambridge's teletype chuckled as it recorded reports. Bahia. Provincetown. Manila. Addis Ababa. Tel Aviv. Edmonton. ...

"May, honey! Are you all right? You took a day off."

"Am I all right? I'm more than all right! I lost it!"

"You lost what?"

"Shh. Gossip I don't need. ... You know, what you came in to talk to me about. That time. In the ladies'."

"Oh, my goodness. Don't tell me you were—"

"I was, but I'm not. Not anymore. And I didn't have to go to a — to the doctor, either. It just, well, it's gone, that's all."

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"You never told me! I never dreamed—"

"I didn't want to worry you. And something else: I've met the most marvelous man. ... Tell you at lunch."

Lynn composedly told Jon that she was expecting, and he was overjoyed, so much so that it was easy for her to conclude that what he didn't know could hurt him very much. They had a marvelous, romantic month during which he handed her into and out of the car, helped her up steps, carried every package even though it might hold no more than a comb, until she discovered one rather messy morning that they had nothing to expect. At this news Jon expressed sadness, but it was a rather modified sadness. It seemed to have under it a stratum of something else, something not the least sad. This was revealed when he consoled the deprived would-be mother with, "After all, we really have a full life together. In a way, another, ah, person would dilute it, hm?" He smiled then, and took a breath which considerably expanded his broad chest. "I've got to say, though, that it did something for me to learn that I could do it after all. Not that I was really worried or anything. And the fact that you couldn't carry it doesn't change that at all."

"Oh," she said composedly.

Dr. McCambridge had hoped to be approached first by one of the large newmagazines, with good writing and a sizable and energetic research staff; or at least a major city newspaper, part of a chain that would cover the country—foreign press, please copy. These were, however, scooped by a supermarket tabloid that specialized in gross gossip, flying saucers, arthritis pain, and the intimate conduct of stars and high bureaucrats. Dr. McCambridge paused for a moment to consider whether or not to grant the appointment, and then sighed and, from somewhere in the depths of his worldly wisdom, recognized that the impact of these tabloids was upward by way of the underbelly and not downward through the brain; that is to say, they crossed the breakfast table and the bar more readily than did more respectable periodicals. It had to come out sooner or later; it *must* come out, and perhaps it were better done through "I read somewhere that—" or "They're saying that—" than by accurately quoting a trusted source.

"Let him in."

The reporter was something of a surprise. About him was none of his employers' sleaziness, carelessness, or flash. Young, articulate, and bright-eyed, he had done a good deal of homework. He knew quite as much as any layman about the Genetic Research organization and its work, and he knew the towering stature of the man to whom he was talking. He was polite and he was relentless. His name was Szigeti, and after the handshake

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his opening gun was, "I want the truth about what's happening."

"You've got it," said McCambridge easily. "It's raining."

Szigeti's head cocked, birdlike, and his lip twitched. "Perhaps I'd better start over."

McCambridge smiled and nodded.

"I think there's an epidemic."

"I think so, too. There's an influenza strain called Australian Beta that looks quite ominous. There's herpes simplex II, and I understand that some countries have abandoned mass inoculations and we're looking at yellow fever again."

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I do?"

Szigeti made a slight motion which encompassed the entire imposing complex of the Genetic Research establishment. "None of those have anything to do with your specialty."

"What has, then?"

Szigeti leaned forward. "I just keep hearing a story — the same story over and over, but from all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Somebody's wife or girlfriend gets pregnant, and then she loses it — real soon, second month."

"It happens."

"Sure it happens, has happened. But — maybe because I'm a reporter — I get this itch. I mean, if somebody walks down the street knocking his head with his fist every time he passes a lamppost, that's just another nut. But when six, ten, twenty people start doing it, I get this itch. ... Has anybody come to you with this yet?"

"Nobody in the media, if that's what you mean."

"That isn't what I meant, but I'm pleased to hear it." He had a good smile.

"Does your itch suggest anything else?"

"No. Well, maybe yes. Maybe it's too early to tell. Maybe what these women, these couples are going through has them spooked; they don't want to risk it again. But I haven't heard yet that any woman who has lost one this way has been able to get pregnant again."

"Not *able?*"

"Well, I guess I can't really say that. But *you* might. That's what made me think of coming here."

"What does her doctor say?"

"Whose doctor?"

"Jesus," Szigeti breathed. After a moment, he said, "I've heard about you, Dr. McCambridge. Now I believe everything I've heard. You guessed it. My wife. Mattie. We have one kid. We wanted another; she lost it. There was nothing wrong with her the first time and there's nothing wrong with her now, or me."

"Your doctor says."

"Our doctor says. And he says keep trying." Szigeti's mouth twitched at the corner. "We keep trying. Everything. Eight months now since we went through what's written in her files, what they call SA: spontaneous abortion."

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"I'm sorry," McCambridge said with all his heart.

"Not your fault," said Szigeti brusquely. He withdrew a very clean handkerchief and blew his nose and put the handkerchief away. "I guess when you have one thing uppermost in your head day and night, it colors everything you do and think about. So I began looking around me, and I began hearing this same story over and over again." He wet his lips and leaned forward with that sharp-eyed, birdlike cock of the head. "Working for a scandal sheet has it advantages. Sure it's out for sensation even if it has to knock the corners off the truth to get it. And yes, it has done a lot of damage to some good people, though I have to say there's not as much of that as there was, and there will be less. But you know, I can investigate a lot of things the respectable press wouldn't touch. Invent a pill that really does cure arthritis and I'll run the story next week while your kind — sorry, Doctor — hide it away for six years of animal and human tests and evaluations. Meanwhile, millions of people will go on hurting without any real hope. I can maybe get them no pills, but I can get them the hope. ... I'm making a speech."

"It's a good speech," said McCambridge. "Make more."

Szigeti looked startled, then grateful. "If there's a really genuine saucer landing or Bigfoot sighting, I guarantee someone like me will be there first, because I'll get there fast because I want it to be real, and not like a *Time* or *Newsweek* researcher who gets there slowly because he or she wants it denied. Not only that: who buys my paper? Mostly people checking out at supermarkets — all kinds of people with their eggs and bread and toothpaste and deodorants. They'll talk to me in ways they never would to reporters from the glossy press. They will tell me what they believe and what they want to believe. I can start more of a ground swell through and through the population before the big-name newsmagazines even know it's there; and that goes for the wire services and broadcast as well ... and sometimes they never do know it's there until some joker wins an election by a ninety percent landslide, all the polls upset, all the experts with egg on their faces. ... The media talk to each other, Doctor. It's easy to see that the people who write for the *Atlantic Monthly* and the 'little' literary-poetry magazines write only for the people who read them. It isn't as easy to see that the same thing is true of the national press. *I* write for everybody there is."

"I like it. I especially like your use of the word *media* as a plural." McCambridge leaned back to smile. "I'm glad you came."

Szigeti's lips performed a brief whimsical twist. "That," he said, "I'm really not used to from people like you."

"There are no people like me," said

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McCambridge without arrogance. "Yes, it *is* an epidemic."

There is an experience that should have its own special term; it is the experience of running up six steps of a five-step flight of stairs, and falling flat at the top. Szigeti, when he had recovered from this metaphorical disorientation, slowly brought out his notebook, by his expression asking permission.

McCambridge waved his hand. "Go ahead." When the reporter had found his page, he said, "It's a viroid. A new one."

"Did you say virus?"

"I said *viroid*. It's a weird little thing. 'Little.' That's an understatement. I mean *small*. ... When viruses were first discovered, they used to call them 'filterable viruses.' Nobody had ever seen one; nobody ever did until the electron microscope was invented. They were discovered when it was found that a filter fine enough to strain out bacteria was not fine enough to filter out viruses. It was found that the fluid that came through the filter could cause virus diseases, and for a time it was thought that the fluid itself was some sort of disease-causing solution, a liquid organic chemical. But finally the virus was identified for what it is — a kind of metalife, a sort of living crystal. You know what these filters were made of?"

Szigeti shook his head.

"Porcelain. And if they can get through porcelain, they can get through almost anything, even rubber. That's the virus. The viroid is *much* smaller. It's nothing but a little fleck of nucleic acid that acts like a bit of DNA without the protein coating that DNA has. These technicalities aren't exactly sensational."

"Not yet."

"Well then, here it comes. Nobody knows how many, or how many *kinds* of these dustmotes are drifting around in the organic machinery. Most of 'em just get lost. One or two, however, do seem to be specific. There's one that causes a kind of lymphoma, a sort of leukemia. It does this by slipping into the DNA molecule and replacing one of the — what you might call — the control modules. The thing is, this altered DNA replicates. I mean, all that can happen pretty fast.

"That's enough background. What we have here is a viroid that drifts around in the blood and lymph systems until it encounters the unique structure of a fertilized egg, and does something — we don't know what — to the whole egg factory itself. What happens then is that the fertilized ovum goes on to the uterus in a normal way, attaches itself to the wall, and then goes wild. In six weeks or so the body recognizes that something's going on that's not quite right, and right on schedule menstration — now called SA, spontaneous abortion — occurs, and out comes the damaged fetus. Just as well, too; in no way could it come to term."

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"I get it. But what about my idea that from then on the woman can't conceive anymore?"

"I was coming to that. The other thing this altered DNA does — oh, and it's such a tiny, miniscule thing — is to slightly change the outer integument of the ripening ovum, so that sperm can't penetrate it. Maybe it's tougher, or maybe, like a normal fertilized egg, it sends out a signal that conception has already occurred. Every egg that ripens after that will do the same thing. ... I have to say, I'm impressed. We have people up to their necks in this research, and not one of them has really understood what this means. And you do."

"Somebody once used the phrase 'to think the unthinkable, one must accept the unacceptable,' " said the reporter. "I was born with a head that does that, and it hasn't always been an asset, because it produces mountains of nonsense. Just once in a while it comes up with the nugget."

"A statistical necessity," smiled McCambridge. "Shovel enough manure, and you're bound to discover a horse."

Szigeti laughed briefly, sobered, and said, "Maybe this comes from a layman's ignorance, but if this change in the whole body's DNA happens, doesn't it become heritable?"

"It does."

Szigeti placed his hands flat on the pages of his notebook and lowered his head. There was a long silence, in which McCambridge could almost hear the flickering, the penetrations of many points here, and here, and here, of a polished, needle-pointed mental rapier. He was even aware of the very moment when the needle sank into the only possible penetrable target.

Szigeti raised his head slowly. His face was pale. "How contagious is this?"

"Very."

"How much of it is there by now?"

McCambridge slid open his flat central drawer and withdrew a stack of teletypes. He passed them across to the reporter — eleven pages, a list. "These are the locations of known outbreaks. It is certainly partial. The compilation is made only from the discovery of only one case in each location, and where there is one, there will be more. Yes, my friend, there is an epidemic."

Szigeti leafed through the sheets. "What's causing it?" he whispered.

McCambridge shrugged. "What do you like? Sunspots. Pollution. Recombinants escaped from a laboratory. A mad scientist. International terrorists. A superpower out to dominate the world. A master criminal with the secret cure, with blackmail and ransom in mind. Aliens from outer space. Your choice, Mr. Szigeti; all grist to the mill. Especially your mill."

Szigeti put the teletypes down as if afraid they might explode. "You can't joke about this. This is the end of the world."

"Live with it as long as I have and

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you'll joke about it. You'll have to."

"I'm sorry. Yes, of course." For at least the third time the reporter looked at McCambridge as if he were seeing something, someone, altogether new. "Where did it begin? You people know where flu strains begin; you give them names: Australia, Hong Kong."

McCambridge tapped the teletypes. "Can you tell from looking at these?"

"No way. It's all over." He looked up. "In more ways than one. It's all over," he said again, convincing that within himself which refused to believe. "There's no cure?"

Again McCambridge answered without answering.

"No prevention?"

"Celibacy. Not," he added ironically, "that that's cured anything so far except maybe joy. ... And my fairly well educated guess is that this minuscule little pile of chemicals is going to have its way eventually even with celibates. Widespread enough, the viroid would be happy to travel on kisses and sneezes. Why not? Viruses do, some of 'em. And any exposed male is a carrier. Like with some yeast infections, the male has no symptoms and can still carry. Difference is, with this one, he has no symptoms and he *will* carry, once exposed."

"How ... how long do we have?"

"The human race? Why, everybody now alive will live a long and happy life. Or a long and unhappy one. Or a short one. Beyond that I have nothing to say. ... Mr. Szigeti — don't look at me that way. I know I handed you a blockbuster, but you're making me feel like the messenger in the old days bringing bad news, knowing the king would have him killed because of it."

"I — God, I don't think you caused the epidemic."

"I'm relieved to hear that. Now go write your scoop. And — Szigeti — keep in touch. I like you."

The reporter went to the door, turned, tried to speak, took out his handkerchief, blew his nose, departed.

Top Scientist says:

THIS IS THE END OF THE WORLD

Worldwide Epidemic Sterilizes Women

Dr. Gerald McComb McCambridge of the internationally famous Genetic Laboratories stated, in an exclusive interview with this paper, that mankind faces extinction within two generations. His assertion — that a highly contagious disease has appeared all over the world and will result in the inability of women everywhere to bear children — is borne out by reports from an increasing number of doctors and hospitals of the appearance of the mysterious plague.

Not since the dreaded Black Plague of the Middle Ages has there been ...

Honey, you feel all right?"

"I feel just fine."

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"Look here what it says in the paper."

" ...'loss of the fertilized ovum in six weeks, and thereafter incapable of...' But I couldn't've had that; I tell you, I got no plague, I feel fine."

"Well, it says here there're no other symptoms, that ... here it is: 'otherwise the disease has no other effect.' "

"Well, anything to sell the paper, you know that. I tell you, there's nothing wrong, I feel just fine. ... Oh Sammy, I'm scared. I'm so scared. ..."

A clothing manufacturer in downtown Los Angeles began production of filmy ladies' T-shirts emblazoned with the words I'VE HAD IT.

Breaking the news in this way was a stroke of genius. The ink was still wet on the first printing when Dr. McCambridge's phone rang. It was an attorney suggesting himself as Dr. McCambridge's counsel in a lawsuit against the paper for malicious defamation. McCambridge suggested that the attorney go back to chasing ambulances; he was out of his league. And after that no one called Dr. McCambridge on the subject of the epidemic for three days. The news was soaking up from below; so many believed nothing that 'scandal sheet' ever printed that the truth came to them gradually. By the time the wire services began to be aware of the story, by the time city editors got around to sending out reporters, by the time broadcast news directors got their writers banging out the scripts on their big-type typewriters, more than half the population already knew.

After the three days, of course, it was trickle to flood to deluge. McCambridge gave interviews to the top three newsmagazines, two wire services, three women's magazines, and the raunchiest pornography monthly on the market (on the grounds that the porn mag would reach all the readers the other magazines did not). Thereafter he dictated a cassette (which he rephrased every 48 hours, calling each an 'update'), left standing orders not to be disturbed by anyone, particularly doctors and politicians, and hid in his lab, ostensibly in search of a cure — which was a lie.

It was pretty wild at first: a rush to the churches and temples, sometimes by the most improbable people; a flood tide of agression against persons, against nations, quelled almost immediately by a larger tide of sobriety, reflection, self-examination. Acquisition — of goods, companies, funds — went to an unheard-of peak and then plunged as more and more people began to wonder if it were really useful to own such a lot for such a little. Regrettably, there were some suicides, yet the overall suicide rate began to decline; why accelerate the inevitable?

McCambridge called Szigeti in. The young reporter was sallow, drawn; if he continued to carry whatever it was

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that burdened him, he would not be called 'young' very much longer.

"I've been thinking about a cure," said McCambridge.

"Who hasn't?" said Szigeti dolefully.

"And I wanted your thoughts."

"*You* wanted *my* thoughts?"

"Get off the 'awe' bit," McCambridge said testily. "I like the way your head works and I don't think it works like mine. So throw mine and yours into the same hopper and we'll turn the handle; something new might grind out."

Szigeti leaned back, closed his eyes. "Thoughts about a cure." He was silent for a time. He opened his eyes. "We need it; that's the bottom line." He paused. "Maybe the planet doesn't need it; it gets along fine with extinct species." (McCambridge nodded approvingly.) "But *we* damn well do." He paused again. "One thing I've been lying awake with is if we could choose among a whole variety of cures, which would be the best one? I mean, I know that if one could be found right now, we'd grab it, whatever it was; but suppose we had a choice? And what got to me, from what I've learned about this rotten species that I ... love so much, man the destroyer, man the builder ... hit me if I get poetic, Doctor."

"Why on earth should I? Go on."

"I think if we had a choice of cures, some pretty powerful effort would be made to see to it that the cure went only to the right kind of people. White people, say. Or Jews. Or rich people. Or Baptists. I guess I knew this before, but it wasn't until the epidemic that I really *knew* what I've always sort of known: that faced with real disaster, we tend to hang together, but as soon as the heat is off, it takes only seconds for 'Me First' to show up. So ..." Another long closed-eyes pause. "So if there ever is a cure, I would hope it was something available to everybody everywhere, rich, poor, emerging, whatever. Not something secret and owned by somebody who wanted to be paid for it. Not something that needed high-technology processing. ... Not that I wouldn't want to see that kind of cure, or any other cure."

"I understand. You're talking optimums. This is sort of a weird coincidence, you know."

"What coincidence?"

"Every bit of our research points to a single possible treatment that could reverse the viroid effect that's behind this thing. Nothing known will attack the viroid directly — not without bombing everything around it. The only approach is to create an environment in which it can't replicate. The only thing that can do this is a very complex protein that is at one stage lethal, and at another, nutritious. Example: the akee."

"The what?"

"Akee. It's a handsome fruit that grows wild in Jamaica particularly, though it's happy to grow anywhere with that climate. It's a strange-looking

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thing, bright red-orange, with a shiny black pit that is half inside and half outside the rind. It looks ripe before it is ripe. When it is ripe it's delicious, cooked with salt fish — it's practically a Jamaican national dish. But if you eat it before it's ripe it can kill you.

"Another vegetable with the right characteristics, also a protein poison, is that fava bean, and this one will grow virtually anywhere that anything will grow. Eaten raw, it's pretty deadly. Cooked, it's very sustaining, with trace minerals and vitamins, and a really efficient protein and a good measure of carbohydrates and oil.

"Every test we can devise — and we devise a lot around here — indicates that at the exact stage at which these poison proteins turn into real food, they are in an intermediate, interface stage. Catch it there, screen it out, and feed it to someone with the plague, and it will create an environment that — well, to avoid the gobbledgook — that coats the viroidal DNA with glue. It doesn't kill it or remove it; the viroidal DNA just can't *do* anything, and it dies. It's replaced by what it's used to — the original DNA structure. An ovum fertilized at that time will be normal and will come to term."

Szigeti had begun to breathe hard and irregularly, like a hurt child about to cry. "I think ... you're telling me ... that there is a cure."

McCambridge leaned back and beamed at him. "Yup. And that's your scoop for today."

Szigeti had a new clean handkerchief. Did he change them twice a day? McCambridge waited until he had put it away and then said, " 'Cure' is a peculiar name for it, but it can spread fast like any other four-letter word."

"I've got to know more. Are there any side effects?"

"*Damn it!*" McCambridge roared. "You've just pushed my number one crusade button. *There are no side effects,* you hear that? There are no side effects! 'Side effects' is a piece of semantic wizardry, a brainwashing trick, foisted on the world by the marketing people in so-called 'ethical' drug companies. I could write an ad, medical-journal style, for the Pill, with a big headline — FOR SWOLLEN ANKLES, BLOOD CLOTS, AND NAUSEA — and a long list in small print of side effects: among them, *it may act as a contraceptive.* You get what I'm saying? Compound a drug, you put in big words what you want to do, and in little words all other things it does, and you call all those other things side effects. *There are no side effects!* You get that? There are only *effects.* From now on, anytime you find yourself saying 'side effects' — bite your tongue!"

"Wow!" said Szigeti admiringly.

McCambridge relaxed, leaned back and laughed, wiping his brow with a tissue. "I do go off bang sometimes, don't I? Well: effects. The vegetable protein I described can be prepared in quantity very cheaply from akees and

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fava. Fava especially can be grown anywhere and harvested quickly. The only precision part of the process is to get the transitionary stage out of the product and isolate it, but that can be done with automatic machinery. What you come up with is a gray-green paste that tastes kind of good until you realize it's going to be your sole sustenance for two months or more. And I mean sole sustenance; anything else, even salt, with it and you've diluted or cancelled it. And it won't work.

"And that isn't the only *effect*. The nutritious protein sustains the patient adequately, but there's enough of the poisonous protein left in it to make the patient feel nauseated a lot of the time, with occasional dizziness, double vision, and the like. *And* some of the hair will fall out and the skin will get scaly and dry."

"Both men and women?"

"Only women. Men would have the same symptoms, but there's no immunity. The viroid's too widespread; it just wouldn't do any good."

"You mean people will have to go through this every time they want a child?"

"They will. Of course, the ultimate reward is that they will have a child. Also," he added, "the hair will grow back better than before and the skin will recover without fine wrinkles, really renewed."

"But surely medical technology can get to a one-shot treatment. You've done it before."

McCambridge snorted. "How long has it taken medical technology to find a one-shot cure for rabies — the very first disease subject to a miracle treatment? No, my friend, not with this bug. It's the nature of the beast. We'll keep trying, of course, but this is another one like the rabies cure; we're stuck with a primitive, painful course of treatment for years and years to come. But Szigeti — we'll have those years now, and we'll have them for everybody. Go write it, boy; it's all yours. And — my regards to your wife and kid. Kids."

Heard all over the world, in many languages:

"If you think for one minute I'm going through that just to have your kid, buster, you better think again."

"I know I don't have to take the treatment with you, Sue, but I want to. I want to go through what you go through." "You can't." "Why can't I?" "Because you can't have a baby, and I can. Because I'm a woman. Eve's curse, you know. And even if I get bald and crinkly, I don't want a lover with his dear hair falling out." "Oh, I love you."

"I saw one of them today, she wore a veil over her whole head and face. And everyone stood aside for her, like she was something holy. Because she would have a baby."

"Sell your rubber stock and get into akee orchards. There's a classic buck

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in akee orchards."

A long time later.

"Hello ... Dr. McCambridge?"

"Hello ... Wacky? Whickter?"

"Dr. Whickter here, yes."

"Why the formality?"

"Because this may be the last word I ever speak to you. I wouldn't even go this far but for a sense of fairness. I need my suspicions confirmed, and I want to know if you can possibly explain your motives. Or defend them."

"Oh my, oh my, you *are* on a high horse. What wickedness do you think I've committed?"

"What wickedness? ..." (hard breathing.) "... Let me put it this way: What would a man have to be to concoct a dangerous disease and bring a whole world to the brink of ultimate extinction, just to snatch it back again at the last moment?"

"He'd have to be damned accomplished," said McCambridge gleefully. "He might even have the cure first."

"I'm in a special position to figure this out," said the telephone. "I've known a man like that for a very long time. Very well. He would have to have almost unlimited funding. He'd have to have a profound background in genetics and biology and molecular theory. He'd have to have been a top consultant on population growth, and have traveled all over the world for many years where he saw the very worst effects of exploding populations. He'd have to have a special group of loyal undergraduates of every ethnic variety to touch off a manufactured plague simultaneously in so many places that the source could never be discovered. And he'd have to be an obsessive, arrogant son of a bitch."

"Oh, you forgot a couple of things, Wacky. He'd have to have a pheromone so ingeniously compounded that it would make his operative irresistible to women — but only to women who were ovulating."

"There is no such thing."

"You're right. But let's hypothesize that there were. Let us recall that all female mammals undergo a period of estrus, heat, rut. When that happens there are glandular changes of many kinds affecting the animal and its surroundings and behaviors in many ways."

"But not human females."

"Not human females. Yet at the time of ovulation there are certain traces of that phenomenon. Mittelschmerz, the sharp abdomenal pain some women feel at the moment a ripe ovum moves out. Certain changes of mood, of body and breath odors, of susceptibility — like and dislike — of external odors. More women surrender to seduction and even rape when they are ovulating than when they're not. Granted these things are almost disappearingly subtle, the fact is that they are there, buried in the complexities of the white brain and the endocrines. Vestigial they might be, but so is the abductor minimi digit muscle on the

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outside of your foot, and it can be brought back by the right stimulus, or even by concentration. So! If such an agent is armed with a pheromone so designed that it totally reactivates estrus in the highest, brainless, gland-driven form, and if he has a second weapon in its way just as powerful, it would not be difficult at all to scatter the seed in the most efficient way. Of course," he added quickly, overriding the sputtering from the telephone, "such a supreme aphrodisiac does not exist, if it ever did. An ethical person would see to it that it was destroyed utterly, beyond discovery or recovery."

Whickter's snortings revealed an inner conflict; then: "What second weapon?"

"I don't know, of course, but I was told about it a long time ago by an old college chum. It's a line, a single sentence. I was told that the student who used it batted a thousand. He would simply say, at the right tender moment, "I want an experience. I do not want an affair." He used to say that there were millions of women just aching to hear someone say that; who had many fantasies but who were afraid to go for them for fear of involvement and entanglements."

"You really are a son of a bitch," said Whickter; but he laughed. He then said sententiously, "But I still can't see any decency in a man's bringing about worldwide terror just to satisfy an obsession about overpopulation."

"Overpopulation?" roared McCambridge. "Is that what you're thinking? Gerard O'Neill's space settlements will take care of overpopulation forever. The Club of Rome was wrong: there are no limits to growth, not for this species."

Then he said very quietly, "No, Wacky; whoever did it, did it so that never, never again on this world or within this species, will there be such a thing as an unwanted child."

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Tom Disch's new story, set against the background of the relentless decline of a downtown area, is a deceptively quiet chiller with a real stinger...

Downtown

BY

THOMAS M. DISCH

1.

The House of Buckwheat

Berna Neville came on the floor at eleven, after the breakfast rush, and left at seven-thirty, when the House of Buckwheat closed. It might as well have closed after lunch, the afternoon business was so thin, but all the downtown stores were obliged to subscribe to the illusion that their long decline had reached its nadir and that St. Paul was undergoing a renaissance. Berna didn't know anyone who really believed this, even the owner of the House of Buckwheat, who cleaned out most of the bills from the register promptly at two-thirty and disappeared for the day, just in time to miss the desolation of the moment, around three, when the Muzak suddenly became not only audible but oppressive in its relentless peppiness. Fifteen minutes might go by at a stretch without anyone spinning the revolving door. The tips didn't amount to much, but Berna lived frugally and could get by well enough on just her salary. At forty-six she didn't have the stamina for real waitressing, which was the reason she'd left the job at the hotel — aside from the fact that she could no longer abide the regular customers, bigwigs from the Chamber of Commerce and the State Capitol, who were loud, abusive, and tight-fisted. At least the people who came into the House of Buckwheat didn't think they could treat you like a dog, expecting you to come at the snap of their fingers. In any case, rumor had it that the hotel would be closing soon. Maybe someday they'd just decide to shut down the entire downtown area.

Berna first became aware of the woman in the green pantsuit during the

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quietest stretch of a Tuesday afternoon in April. Maybe she had come in other times earlier, but if so Berna hadn't taken her in. The detail that had made her notice the woman that day, apart from her being the only customer she had, was the fact of her coming in without a coat so early in the year — nothing but the pantsuit over a thin blouse. Berna hadn't thought it was that warm yet. She was about the same age as Berna, or a little older, with her hair knotted up into a bun that looked efficient but not quite tidy. She ordered the House of Buckwheat's basic offering, three pancakes, butter and syrup, $1.25, which included all the coffee you wanted from the Thermos jug on the table. This in itself seemed strange: usually a new customer would indulge in something more exotic — waffles or blueberry pancakes. It was generally the customers who came in every single day (and were beyond trying to pretend that pancakes were some kind of holiday) who ordered the place's unmodified Number One platter — "Stack one!" — customers like the colored man who handled the ticket booth at the porno movie house around the corner on Wabasha, or the nurse from St. Luke's who came in every Wednesday and left a fifty-cent tip.

As it developed, the woman in the pantsuit became another of these regulars, and the only one who put in her appearance during the deadest hour of of the afternoon. She always sat at the same table, away from the windows and out of sight of the cashier. She ordered her pancakes after consulting the menu Berna brought her, and ate them one at a time, carefully apportioning the two butter pats among them. When she was done she would take a pack of cigarettes from her purse (a nice purse of wrinkled brown leather) and smoke a cigarette over her second cup of coffee. She never looked around at the other people in the restaurant, and she never read a book or a newspaper. She didn't tip.

Ordinarily Berna would have resented that, but something about the woman made that inappropriate. How could you grudge a dime from someone who evidently had so little herself, who never wore anything but that same pantsuit day after day, its green as basic as the green in a box of color crayons, with the same off-white blouse, the same scuffed low heels? How could you feel anything but sorry? She was so thin, and so pale, and her hands were so fumbly that almost every time she left the booth there'd be a small puddle of coffee to wipe off the Formica. She never acknowledged Berna as a familiar daily presence, and Berna, who had to wear a button on her uniform saying, "Hi! My name is Berna," regarded this as a civility rather than as coldness. Having to act friendly with customers was a strain she was glad to be spared. And anyhow Berna had a feeling that there was some connection between herself and the woman that went deeper than hellos and talk about the weather. But

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it was just a feeling, and Berna didn't have much use for feelings.

Even so, toward the end of May, Berna began to be concerned for the woman. From her station near the service pass-through to the kitchen she could watch the woman eating her three pancakes with such stolid, mechanical chewing and swallowing, chewing and swallowing, that Berna could tell that the act involved neither appetite nor pleasure but only the duty of supplying her body with calories. Berna felt similarly toward the process of eating, but for that very reason she ate a rational, balanced diet. She never touched the junk they served at the House of Buckwheat (even the bacon was not to be trusted, because of its nitrates), and she wanted to convey to the woman she served that *she* should not either. Could it be that this meal at three o'clock was the *only* meal the woman ate each day? Could she be that poor? Or that foolish? No one could stay healthy long on a diet of sugar, starch, and caffeine. It amounted to suicide. Did she know what she was doing? Indeed, *was* that what she was doing — or did the pancakes just represent, as they did for most of the House of Buckwheat's afternoon customers, an extra midday dessert? Berna didn't dare approach the woman and ask, and there was no other way to find out short of hiring detectives or acting in that capacity herself, which she never could have done. All she could do, and all she did, was to take the woman's order and bring her her pancakes and leave her a check for $1.25.

But she couldn't keep from wondering, and wondering led to noticing of a more particular order than Berna customarily was given to. She noticed that the woman's hair was very infrequently shampooed, and then not quite sufficiently. Similarly, her blouse went for weeks at a time without laundering. Berna noticed that the woman's hands seemed permanently soiled with a light pumice of ash, the dribbling of her cigarettes. She noticed that the seam down the side of her jacket had come unraveled, leaving a three-inch gap that winked open and shut as the woman lifted and lowered her fork, or her coffee cup, or her cigarette. She noticed the smell she gave off, a sour pungency unlike any other human smell that Berna knew.

Where would it stop? she wondered. At what point would the woman's dereliction become so pronounced that she would not be allowed into the restaurant? (For the owner was insistent that the House of Buckwheat was not going to become a haven for undesirables, whatever might happen to the rest of downtown St. Paul.) Berna couldn't bear such thoughts. She had managed, over the last many and painful years, to establish a day-to-day routine that protected her from emotional disequilibriums. In a crisis she could get Valium. On the whole it was a life she hated, but at least she was

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able to keep her sanity. She didn't want this stranger coming in every afternoon and upsetting her. At least she might have sat at one of the other waitress's tables sometimes.

With this in mind Berna had once or twice kept the woman waiting, menuless, for inexcusable lengths of time, but the woman had just sat in the booth, seeming not to take offense, showing no signs of impatience. Eventually Berna had to go over and take her order for three pancakes, butter, and syrup. She always mentioned the butter and syrup, as though Berna might conceivably forget to include them in the order.

Sometimes she was able to persuade herself that she was overreacting to the situation, that the woman wore this single change of clothing not from destitution but as a kind of badge of defiance (as Berna felt she wore the House of Buckwheat's uniform of black Dacron), a declaration that she would conceal her everyday despair no more than was absolutely required of her. But each day this became harder to believe, and Berna came round at last to the idea that the woman, simply, was dying, or rather was waiting for death to take hold.

Berna never discussed the woman's plight with the other waitresses, though ordinarily they all came to know each other's regular customers and to speculate more or less freely as to where they worked and how they lived. As far as she could tell they weren't even aware of the woman (who did not act in any way that would have drawn attention to herself). Even the cashier who took her money each day (always the exact amount in change, a stack of five quarters, never a bill) never accorded her any sign of special recognition, as she did to the other regulars. But then neither did Berna. It was as though the woman was able to compel whomever she dealt with to mimic her own subdued and denatured plausibility.

In July the summer's first full-scale heat wave settled over St. Paul, and business at the House of Buckwheat slackened to a trickle even at lunchtime. No one wants pancakes, in whatever combination with eggs, bacon, ice cream or fruit sauce, once the temperature has climbed above ninety. The younger and less able of the other two afternoon waitresses was laid off, and Berna became responsible for the two window tables to the left of the cash register. But even these tables were seldom occupied.

On the Friday of the second week of the heat wave, the woman came in as usual to order her invariable three pancakes, butter, and syrup, but when Berna brought them to her she didn't seem to notice. She sat there touching the edge of the wood-patterned Formica with her fingertips for so long that Berna considered going back to the booth and asking if something was wrong with the order. Then the woman slid sideways into the corner of the

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padded seat — not suddenly, or even alarmingly, but almost as though she'd fallen asleep. Her eyes closed and her mouth dropped open. Her arms hung limp at her sides.

No one else had noticed. The cashier and the other waitresses were taking a coffee break at the window table on the far side of the register. The Muzak was playing a xylophone rendition of "The Fool on the Hill."

Berna was sure the woman was dead, but she could not bring herself to go over to the booth and make certain. She would have had to touch the woman, to try and rouse her on the assumption that she had only fainted, which was entirely possible in such weather. Berna couldn't think which would be worse, knowing positively that she was dead or seeing her eyes opening, her lips forming some confused apology. Berna knew, in any case, that the woman *was* dead, so there was no point in going through the ordeal. She refused to.

Instead she went back, through the kitchen, to the windowless changing room, changed out of her uniform, and left the restaurant by the side door. She didn't excuse or explain her departure to anyone, even the cook, who was watching.

2.
Butterworth's

Once on the street, in that muggy heat, Berna realized there was nowhere she could go. She turned east so as to avoid passing in front of the restaurant windows, and when she came to the entrance to Butterworth's she went inside for the sake of the air-conditioning. The department store was almost as deserted as the House of Buckwheat had been. A girl in heavy eye makeup with bruises painted on her cheekbones stood, idly glowering, before a display of L'Air du Temps.

Berna hurried through Cosmetics and past counters draped with costume jewelry. In her haste she almost knocked over a bin of purses on sale for $24.95. Each of the purses in the bin was identical to the purse of wrinkled brown leather carried by the woman in the green pantsuit.

A bell rang and a disembodied voice announced the closing of the store in another fifteen minutes. The voice asked people to take their purchases to a cashier.

Berna got on the Up escalator and awaited the moment, so lovely and so fleeting, when she would rise above all the counters and partitions and could look out across the whole sales floor as though from a low-flying helicopter. The moment came and went. On 2 she walked quickly through Menswear and past the trellised entrance to Junior Miss, festooned this month with swimsuits and beach toys, to the unencumbered expanse of Sportswear and Casuals. For some reason there was never any sales help in evidence in Sportswear and Casuals. For that reason it

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was Berna's favorite department, and she had come here often to enjoy at its full the store's sense of peace and protectiveness.

She ran her hand luxuriously along a rack of separates, all the same shimmery polyester-jersey blend. The prettiest of the lot was a deep plum color, though there was also a cream-colored blouse nearly as nice. Not that it mattered — Berna would never had bought such a blouse for herself. To have bought anything the store offered would have seemed somehow to diminish its dignity. Butterworth's was the oldest department store in St. Paul and beginning to show its years, but it was still the most respectable environment Berna knew of. You always felt *safe* in Butterworth's, partly because things were so expensive, partly because its few customers tended to be Berna's age or older. You never saw the riffraff here that sometimes came to the House of Buckwheat.

Another bell rang, and Berna retreated from the threat of eviction by fleeing two floors higher to Furniture. In past years Butterworth's had had six sales floors, but competition with the new St. Paul branch of Dayton's and the general decline of the downtown had made retrenchment necessary, and 4 was now the highest sales floor.

It was also the most beautiful, because the most unchanging. Berna always felt on 4 as though she'd returned to some long-forgotten family home. Here were the same ranks and files of armchairs, rockers, and recliners in Herculon and flowering chintz; the same array of sofas, coffee tables, and gigantic ceramic lamps; the same shining expanse of mahogany veneer and oak that had been here before Christmas, that would be here always. Berna negotiated the sea of tables, sideboards and wardrobes and came to the row of little rooms that ringed the elevator bank. Each little alcove featured a different style or texture. Here was a bedroom done all in butcher block, where large cubes of foam rubber were covered with a fabric their tags declared to be Pecan Illusion. In another alcove an eye-blinding breakfast nook had been created, all in white. In the next a single bookcase, innocent of books, loomed over an upright piano. The piano's cover was lowered chastely over the keyboard and supported a discreet cardboard sign:

> Please refrain from
> playing pianos and
> organs.
> Our sales staff will
> be happy to assist you.

"Miss Neville?" a voice asked — the same voice, though now unamplified, that had announced the closing of the store. She turned round to confront the floor manager, as the badge on the breast pocket of his gray pinstripe suit proclaimed him. None of his other features — the neatly trimmed hair, the eyes shadowed by the frames

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of his glasses, the pleasant but perfunctory smile — told anything more of him than his badge.

"Yes?" she said, deferring at once to his authority, not questioning that he should know her name.

"Would you follow me, please?"

He led her along a dim-lighted corridor of blind windows displaying various styles of curtains and draperies. At the end of the corridor was a narrow escalator with wooden treads barred by a small chain. The floor manager removed the chain and began climbing the steps of the motionless escalator. Berna hesitated before following him to the higher floor, but for a moment only.

Berna, if she had thought about it, would have expected 5 to be a jumble of stacked boxes and naked, dusty mannequins, but it presented, on the contrary, an even cheerier and more homelike atmosphere than the floor below, though its arrangement was, at first glance, not so orderly. A four-poster bed loomed up from a welter of enormous African baskets. A long modular couch wound riverlike past console TVs and waterfall racks of carpet samples, past wooden cradles filled with magazines and a sideboard bustling with china figurines, coming to rest at last beside an oak rolltop desk, sale-priced for $959.95.

The floor manager pulled up a rush-bottomed chair to the desk, one of a set of four that sold for $125, and gestured to Berna to be seated in another.

"Well, this is where we live."

"I beg your pardon," said Berna, unconsciously imitating the floor manager's formal manner.

"This is where we live," he repeated a little impatiently. "Here and on 6."

Berna looked about the sprawling space of the abandoned sales floor for some clue to the floor manager's riddle.

"At first it may seem ... oh, not very private. But each of us has his or her own *private* space tucked away out of sight in addition to the sales floor proper. And at night, of course, we have the run of the store. Though there especially we must exercise discretion."

"You mean *all* of the people who work at Butterworth's...?"

The floor manager allowed himself a small laugh. "Goodness no, Miss Neville. Most of the employees have no idea, would even say it were impossible. Only a select few — myself, the two night watchmen, Mr. Richardson, who (I should warn you) has something of a drinking problem, and a number of ladies, like yourself and Joan, who can be trusted to, how shall I say, live quietly."

"Joan?"

"That's to say, Miss Emering. Among ourselves we tend to be informal. Joan, of course, is a special case, having lived here longest. She'd been in charge of Toy World — oh, for years and years — but when Toy World was moved to the basement and the upper floors were closed, Miss Em-

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ering was terminated. Only a few months short of her retirement." He swiveled his head once to the left and once to the right in stiff-necked reprobation.

"Miss Emering," he continued, "had few resources. She lived in a residence hotel and spent her entire salary on keeping herself looking smart. One must, you know, in this business, take great care of one's *appearance*."

Berna nodded.

"So what was to be done? She'd been thrown virtually into the streets. She was not in the best health (though she never complained). She was too old to find other employment. Toys had been her entire life. Something had to be done — and here, in the very building that was her second home, were two entire floors standing empty."

So she moved here?"

"Would you like to meet her?" he asked in a bright salesmanlike tone that could only be answered in the affirmative. He pushed his chair back and rose, offering his hand to Berna. She followed him back along the stream of the modular sofa and around a stack of imported goatskin accent rugs and through a dense cluster of lawn furniture. There the sales floor angled round the elevator bank to become, as on the floor below, a concourse of individual rooms.

In the first of these rooms, a kind of boudoir, or bedless bedroom, the woman in the green pantsuit stood beside the gauzy curtains covering a cardboard window. She seemed, in the dim light of the alcove, much younger, even, in a subdued way, attractive.

"Miss Emering," said the floor manager, "this is Miss Neville. Miss Neville may be joining us."

Miss Emering smiled at Berna. "We've met," she said. Her voice seemed completely different than it had in the House of Buckwheat when she would give her order — lower, clearer, authoritative. "But we've never gotten to know each other, really. Though I knew, without our ever speaking, that you were meant to be one of us. Isn't that strange? I knew."

"Well, if you two ladies will excuse me..." said the floor manager, backing off into the shadows.

When he was gone, Miss Emering asked Berna if she smoked. She said she didn't. "You'll excuse me if I do," said Miss Emering and took a package of cigarettes from her purse, which lay on the black glass surface of a vanity table.

"I thought...." Berna began.

"Yes?" said Miss Emering, lifting one eyebrow ironically as she touched the tip of her cigarette with the lighter's flame.

But Berna could not bring herself to say that she had thought Miss Emering was dead. It would have seemed both ridiculous and impolite. So instead she asked: "How did you know I'd come here?"

Miss Emering considered this, and asked in turn, "Why *did* you?"

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"For no reason. It was ... instinctive. I've always *liked* it here. ..."

Miss Emering nodded. "Yes, there's something quite special about Butterworth's. We all feel that."

"There's no one who'll miss me," Berna declared, startling herself by her own boldness. "No one at all, out there. And I won't miss them!"

Without really laughing, Miss Emering made a face expressive of laughter. "Look," she said, lifting her hand, "I have something here that's just for you."

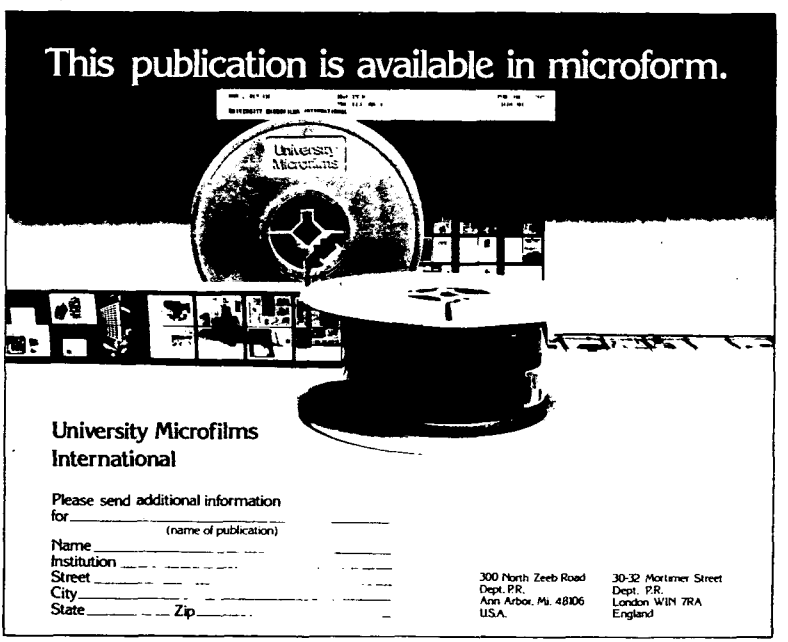
She went to the rosewood armoire that stood in the corner and opened it. On the back of the door was a mirror, and inside the armoire, on a hanger, was the blouse with the ruffled collar.

"Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful."

"Let me," said Miss Emering, taking the blouse from the armoire and undoing its mother-of-pearl buttons.

Berna undid her blouse and let it slip to the floor. She turned her back to Miss Emering and lifted her arms. Miss Emering slipped the blouse over her arms and onto her shoulders in a single deft motion. Then, smiling, she adjusted the door of the armoire so that Berna could see herself in its mirror, and Berna, returning her smile — vacuous, melancholy, the immemorial smile of all mannequins — raised her delicately jointed fingers to touch the topmost button of the plum-colored blouse, amazed by her own changeless beauty.



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Ben Bova, former editor of Analog *and* Omni, *is now writing full time, which is right where we want him, of course. His new story concerns a stranded Moon mission and an authentic space hero, name of...*

Sam Gunn

BY

BEN BOVA

The spring-wheeled truck rolled to a silent stop on the Sea of Clouds. The fine dust kicked up by its six wheels floated lazily back to the mare's soil. The hatch to the truck cab swung upward, and a space-suited figure climbed slowly down to the lunar surface, clumped a dozen ponderously careful steps, then turned back toward the truck.

"Yeah, this is the spot. The transponder's beeping away, all right."

Two more figures clambered down from the cab, bulbous and awkward-looking in the bulky space suits. One of them turned a full three hundred sixty degrees, scanning the scene through the gold-tinted visor of the suit's bubble helmet. There was nothing to be seen except the monotonous gray plain, pockmarked by craters like an ancient, savage battlefield that had been petrified into solid stone long eons ago.

"Christ, you can't even see the ringwall from here!"

"That's what he wanted — to be out in the open, without a sign of civilization in sight. He picked this spot himself, you know."

"Helluva place to want to be buried."

"That's what he specified in his will. Come on, let's get to work. I want to get back to Selene City before the sun sets."

It was a local joke: the three space-suited workers had more than two hundred hours before sunset.

Grunting even in the gentle lunar gravity, they slid the coffin from the back of the truck and placed it softly on the roiled, dusty ground. Then they winched the four-meter-high crate from the truck and put it down softly next to the coffin. While one of them

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scoured out a coffin-sized hole in the ground with the blue-white flame of a plasma torch, the other two uncrated the big package.

"Ready for the coffin," said the worker with the torch.

The leader of the trio inspected the grave. The hot plasma had polished the stony ground. The two workers heard him muttering over their helmet earphones as he used a hand laser to check the grave's dimensions. Satisfied, he helped them drag the gold-filigreed coffin to the hole and slide it in.

"A lot of work to do for a dead man."

"He wasn't just any ordinary man."

"It's still a lot of work. Why in hell couldn't he be recycled like everybody else?"

"Sam Gunn," said the leader, "never did things like everybody else. Not in his whole cussed long life. Why should he be like the rest of us in death?"

They chattered back and forth through their suit radios as they uncrated the big package. Once they had removed all the plastic and the bigger-than-life statue stood sparkling in the sunlight, they stepped back and gaped at it.

"It's glass!"

"Christ, I never saw anything so damned big."

"Must have cost a fortune to get it here. Two fortunes!"

"He had it done at Island One, I hear. Brought the sculptor up from Earthside and paid him enough to keep him at L-4 for two whole years. God knows how many times he tried to cast a statue this big and failed."

"I didn't know you could make a glass statue so big."

"In zero-G you can. It's hollow. If we were in air, I could ping it with my finger and you'd hear it ring."

"Crystal."

"That's right."

One of the workers, the young man, laughed softly.

"What's so funny?" the leader asked.

"Who else but Sam Gunn would have the gall to erect a crystal statue of himself and then have it put out in the middle of this godforsaken emptiness, where nobody's ever going to see it. It's a monument to himself, for himself. What ego! What monumental ego."

The leader chuckled, too. "Yeah. Sam had an ego, all right. But he was a smart little guy, too."

"You knew him?" the young woman asked.

"Sure. Knew him well enough to tell you that he didn't pick this spot for his tomb just for the sake of his ego. He was smarter than that."

"What was he like?"

"When did you know him?"

"Come on, we've still got work to do. He wants the statue positioned exactly as he stated in his will, with its back toward Selene and the face looking toward Earth."

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"Yeah, O.K., but when did you know him, huh?"

"Oh golly, years ago. Decades ago. When the two of us were just young pups. The first time either of us came here, back in — Lord, it's thirty years ago. More."

"Tell us about it. Was he really the hero that the history tapes say he was? Did he really do all the things they say?" asked the young woman.

"He was a phony!" the young man snapped. "Everybody knows that. A helluva showman, sure, but he never did half the stuff he took credit for. Nobody could have, not in one lifetime."

"He lived a pretty intense life," said the leader. "If it hadn't been for a faulty suit valve he'd still be running his show from here to Titan."

"A showman. That's what he was. No hero."

"What was he like?" the young woman repeated.

So, while the two youngsters struggled with the huge, fragile crystal statue, the older man sat himself on the lip of the truck's cab hatch and told them what he knew about the first time Sam Gunn came to the Moon.

The skipper used the time-honored cliché. He said, "Houston, we have a problem here."

There were eight of us, the whole crew of *Artemis IV*, huddled together in the command module. After six weeks of living on the Moon, the module smelled like a pair of unwashed gym socks. With a woman president, the space agency figured it would be smart to name the second round of lunar explorations after a female: Artemis was Apollo's sister. Get it?

But it had just happened that the computer who picked the crew selections for *Artemis IV* picked all men. Six weeks without even the sight of a woman, and now our blessed-be-to-God return module refused to light up. We were stranded. No way to get back home.

As usual, Capcom in Houston was the soul of tranquility. "Ah, A-IV, we read you and copy that the return module is no-go. The analysis team is checking the telemetry. We will get back to you soonest."

It didn't help that Capcom, that shift, was Sandi Hemmings, the woman we all lusted after. Among the eight of us, we must have spent enough energy dreaming about cornering Sandi in zero gravity to propel each of us right back to Houston. Unfortunately, dreams have a very low specific impulse, and we were still stuck on the Moon, a quarter-million miles from the nearest woman.

Sandi played her Capcom duties strictly by the book, especially since all our transmissions were taped for later review, but managed to say, "Don't worry, boys. We'll figure it out and get you home."

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Praise God for small favors.

We had spent hours checking and rechecking the cursed return module. It was engineer's hell: everything checked but nothing worked. The thing just sat there like a lump of dead metal. No electrical power. None. Zero. The control board just stared at us as cold and glassy-eyed as a banker listening to your request for an unsecured loan. We had pounded it. We had kicked it. In our desperation we had even gone through the instruction manual, page by page, line by line. Zip. Zilch. The bird was dead.

When Houston got back to us, six hours after the skipper's call, it was the stony unsmiling image of the mission coordinator who glowered at us as if we had deliberately screwed up the return module. He told us:

"We have identified the problem, *Artemus IV*. The return module's main electrical power supply has malfunctioned."

That was like telling Othello that he was a Moor.

"We're checking out bypasses and other possible fixes," Old Stone Face went on. "Sit tight, we'll get back to you."

The skipper gave him a patient sigh. "Yes, sir."

"We're not going anywhere," said a whispered voice. Sam Gunn's, I was certain.

The problem, we finally discovered, was caused by a micrometeoroid, no less. A little grain of sand that just happened to roam through the solar system for four and a half-billion years and then decided to crash-dive itself right into the main fuel cell of our return module's power supply. It was so tiny that it didn't do any visible damage to the fuel cell; just hurt it enough to let it discharge electrically for most of the six weeks we had been on the Moon. And the other two fuel cells, sensing the discharge through the module's idoit computer, tried to recharge their partner for six weeks. The result: all three of them were dead and gone by the time we needed them.

It was Sam who discovered the pinhole in the fuel cell, the eighteenth time we checked out the power supply. I can remember his exact words, once he realized what had happened:

"Shit!"

Sam was a feisty little guy who would have been too short for astronaut duty if the agency hadn't lowered the height requirements so that women could join the corps. He was a good man, a whiz with a computer and a born tinkerer who liked to rebuild old automobiles and then race them on the abandoned freeways whenever he could scrounge up enough old-fashioned petrol to run them. The Terror of Clear Lake, we used to call him. The Texas Highway Patrol had other names for him. So did the agency administrators; they cussed near threw him out of the astronaut corps at least half a dozen times.

But we all loved Sam, back in those

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days, as we went through training and then blasted off for our first mission to the Moon. He was funny, he kept us laughing. And he did the things and said the things that none of us had the guts to do or say.

The skipper loved Sam a little less than the rest of us did, especially after six weeks of living in each other's dirty laundry. Sam had a way of *almost* defying any order he received; he reacted very poorly to authority figures. Our skipper, Lord love him, was as stiff-backed an old-school authority figure as any of them. He was basically a good Joe, and I'm cursed if I can remember his name. But his big problem was that he had memorized the rule book and tried never to deviate from it.

Well, anyway, there we were, stranded on the lunar surface after six weeks of hard work. Our task had been to make a semipermanent underground base out of the prefabricated modules that had been, as the agency quaintly phrased it, "landed remotely on the lunar regolith in a series of carefully coordinated unmanned logistic missions." In other words, they had dropped nine different module packages over a fifty-square kilometer area of Mare Nubium, and we had to find them all, drag them to the site that Houston had picked for Base Gamma, set them up properly, scoop up enough of the top layers of soil to cover each module and the connecting tunnels to a depth of 0.3048 meter (that's one foot, in English), and then link in the electric power reactor and all the wiring, plumbing, heating, and air circulation units. Which we had done, adroitly and efficiently.

And now that our labors were finished and we were ready to leave — no-go. Too bad we couldn't have covered the return module with 0.3048 meter of lunar soil; that would have protected the fuel cells from that sharpshooting micrometeoroid.

The skipper decided it would be bad procedure to let us mope around and brood.

"I want each of you to run a thorough inventory of all your personal supplies: the special foods you've brought with you, your spare clothing, entertainment kits, the works."

"That'll take four minutes," Sam muttered, loud enough for us all to hear him. The eight of us were crammed into the command module, eight guys squeezed into a space built for three, at most. It was barely high enough to stand in, and the metal walls and ceiling always felt cold to the touch. Sam was pressed in with the guys behind me; I was practically touching noses with the skipper. The guys in back giggled at his wisecrack. The skipper scowled.

"Goddammit, Gunn, can't you behave seriously for even a minute? We've got a real problem here."

"Yessir," Sam replied. If he hadn't been squeezed in so tightly, I'm sure he would have saluted. "I'm merely at-

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tempting to keep morale high, sir."

The skipper made an unhappy snorting noise, and then told us that we would spend the rest of the shift checking out *all* the supplies that were left: not just our personal stuff, but the mission's supplies of food, the nuclear reactor, the water recirculation system, equipment of all sorts, air. ...

We knew it was busywork, but we had nothing else to do. So we wormed our way out of the command module and crawled through the tunnels toward the other modules that we had laid out and then covered with bulldozed soil. It was a neat little buried base we had set up for later explorers to use. I got a sort of claustrophobic feeling, just then, that this buried base might turn into a mass grave for eight astronauts.

I was dutifully heading back for barracks module A, where four of us had our bunks and personal gear, to check out my supplies, as the skipper ordered. Sam snaked up beside me. Those tunnels, back in those days, were prefabricated Earthside to be laid out once we got to the construction site. I think they were designed by midgets. You couldn't stand up in them, they were too low. You had to really crawl along on hands and knees if you were my size. Sam was able to shuffle through them with bent knees, knuckle-walking like a miniature gorilla. He loved the tunnels.

"Hey, wait up," he hissed to me.

I stopped.

"Whattaya think will get us first, the air giving out or we starve to death?"

He was grinning cheerfully. I said, "I think we're going to poison our air with methane. We'll fart ourselves to death in another couple of days."

Sam's grin widened. "C'mon ... I'm setting up a pool on the computer. I hadn't thought of air pollution. You wanna make a bet on that?" He started to King-Kong down the shaft to the right, toward the computer and life-support module. If I had had the space, I would have shrugged. Anyway, I followed him there.

Three of the other guys were in the computer module, huddled around the display screen like Boy Scouts around a campfire.

"Why aren't you checking out the base's supplies, like the skipper said?" I asked them.

"We are, Straight Arrow," replied Micky Lee, our refugee from Chinatown. He tapped the computer screen. "Why go sorting through all that junk when the computer has it already listed in alphabetical order for us?"

That wasn't what the skipper wanted, and we all knew it, but Micky was right. Why bother with busywork? We wrote down lists that would keep the skipper happy. By hand. If we had let the computer print out the lists, Skip would have gotten wise to us right away.

While we scribbled away, copying what was on the screen, we talked

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over our basic situation.

"Why the hell can't we use the nuke to recharge the fuel cells?" Julio Marx asked. He was our token Puerto Rican Jew, a tribute to the agency's Equal Opportunity policy. Julio was also a crackerjack structural engineer who had save my life the day I had started to unfasten my helmet in the barracks module just when one of those blessed prefab tunnels had cracked its air-lock seal. But that's another story.

Sam gave Julio a sorrowful stare. "The two systems are incompatible, Jules." Then, with a grin, Sam launched into the phoniest Latin accent you ever heard. "The nuclear theenyg, man, it got too many volts for the fuel cells. Like, you plug the nukie to the fuel cells, man, you make a beeg boom and we all go to dat big San Juan in thee sky. You better steek to plucking chickens, man, an' leave the electree-city alone."

Julio, who towered a good inch and a half over Sam, grinned back at him and answered, "O.K., Shorty, I dig."

"Shorty! Shorty!" Sam's face went red. "All right, that's it. The hell with the betting pool. I'm gonna let you guys all die of boredom. Serve you right."

We made a big fuss and soothed his feathers and cajoled him into setting up the pool. With a great show of hurt feelings and reluctant but utterly selfless nobility, Sam pushed Micky Lee out of the chair in front of the computer terminal and began playing the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist. Within a few minutes the screen was displaying a list of possible ways for us to die, with Sam's swiftly calculated odds next to each entry. At the touch of a button, the screen displayed a graph, showing how the odds for each mode of dying changed as time went on.

Suffocation, for example, started off as less than a one percent possibility. But within a month the chances began to rise fairly steeply. "The air scrubbers need replacement filters," Sam explained, "and we'll be out of them inside of two more weeks."

"They'll have us out of here in two weeks, for Christ's sake," Julio said.

"Or drop fresh supplies for us," said Ron Avery, the taciturn pilot whom we called Cowboy because of his lean, lanky build and his slow Western drawl.

"Those are the odds," Sam snapped. "The computer does not lie. Pick your poison and place your bets."

I put fifty bucks down on Air Conamination, not telling the other guys of my earlier conversation with Sam. Julio took Starvation, Micky settled on Dehydration (Lack of Water), and Ron picked Murder — which made me shudder.

"What about you, Sam?" I asked.

"I'll wait till the other guys have a chance," he said.

"You gonna let the skipper in on this?" Julio asked.

Sam shook his head. "If I tell him..."

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"I'll tell him," Ron volunteered, with a grim smile. "I'll even let him have Murder, if he wants it. I can always switch to Suicide."

"Droll fellow," said Sam.

Well, you probably read about the mission in your history tapes. Houston was supporting three separate operations on the Moon at the same time, and they were stretched to the limit down there. Old Stone Face promised us a rescue flight in a week. But they had a problem with the booster when they tried to rush things on the pad too much, and the blessed launch had to be pushed back a week, and then another week. They sent an unmanned supply craft to us, but the descent stage got gummed up, so our fresh food, air filters, water supply and other stuff just orbited over us about fifty miles up.

Sam calculated the odds of all these foul-ups and came to the conclusion that Houston was working overtime to kill us. "Must be some sort of an experiment," he told me. "Maybe they need some martyrs to make people more aware of the space program."

We learned afterward that Houston was in deep trouble because of us. The White House was firing people left and right, Congressional committees were gearing up to investigate the fiasco, and the CIA was checking out somebody's idea that the Russians were behind all our troubles.

Meanwhile, we were stranded on the Mare Nubium with nothing much to do but let our beards grow and hope for sinus troubles that would cut off our ability to sense odors.

Old Stone Face was magnificent, in his unflinching way. He was on the line to us every day, despite the fact that his superiors in Houston and Washington were either being fired directly by the President herself or roasted over the shimmering fires of media criticism. There must have been a zillion reporters at Mission Control by the second week of our marooning; we could *feel* the hubbub and tension whenever we talked with Stoney.

"The countdown for your rescue flight is proceeding on an accelerated schedule," he told us. It would never occur to him to say *We're hurrying as fast as we can.* "Lift-off is now scheduled for 0700 on the twenty-fifth."

None of us needed to look at a calendar to know that the twenty-fifth was seventeen days away. Sam's betting pool was looking more serious every hour. Even the skipper had finally taken a plunge: Suffocation.

If it hadn't been for Sandi Hemmings we might have all gone crazy. She took over at Capcom during the night shift, when most of the reporters and the agency brass were asleep. She gave us courage and the desire to pull through, partly just by smiling at us and looking female enough to make us *want* to survive, but mainly by giving us the straight info with no nonsense.

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"They're in deep trouble over at Canaveral," she would tell us. "They've had to go to triple shifts and call up boosters that they didn't think they would need until next year. Some senator in Washington is yelling that we ought to ask the Russians or the Japanese to help out."

"As if either of them had upper stages that could make it to the Moon," one of our guys muttered.

"Well," Sandi said, with her brightest smile, "you'll all be heroes when you finally get back here. The girls will be standing in line to admire you."

"You won't have to stand in line, Sandi," Ron Avery answered, in a rare burst of words. "You'll always be first with us."

The others crowded into the command module added their heartfelt agreement.

Sandi laughed, undaunted by the prospect of the eight of us grabbing for her. "I hope you shave first," she said.

A night or two later she spent hours reading to us the suggestions made by the Houston medical team on how to stretch out our dwindling supplies of food, water, and air. They boiled down to one basic rule: Lie down and don't exert yourselves. Great advice, especially when you're beginning to really worry that you're not going to make it through this mess. Just what we needed to do, lie back in our bunks and do nothing but think.

I caught a gleam in Sam's eye, though, as Sandi waded through the medics' report. The skipper asked her to send the report through our computer printer. She did, and he spent the next day reading and digesting it. Sam spent that day — well, I couldn't figure out where he'd gotten to. I just didn't see him all day long, and Base Gamma really wasn't big enough to hide in, even for somebody as small as Sam.

The skipper, after going through the medics' recommendations, ordered us to take tranquilizers. We had a scanty supply of downers in the base pharmaceutical stores, and Skip divided them equally among us. At the rate of three a day, they would last four days, with four pills left over. About as useful as a cigarette lighter in Hell, but the skipper played it by the book and ordered us to start gobbling tranquilizers.

"They will ease our anxieties and help us to remain as quiet as possible while we wait for the rescue mission," he told us.

He didn't bother to add that the rescue mission, according to Sandi's unofficial word, was still twelve days off. We would run out of food in three more days, and the recycled water was starting to taste as if it hadn't been recycled, if you know what I mean. The air was getting foul, too, but that was probably just our imaginations.

Sam appeared blithely unconcerned, even happy. He whistled cheerfully as Skip rationed out the tranquilizers, then scuttled off down the tunnel that led to our barracks

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module. But by the time I got to my bunk, Sam was nowhere in sight. His whistling was gone. So was his pressure suit.

He had gone out on the surface? For what? To increase his radiation dose? To get away from the rest of us? That was probably it. Underneath his wise-guy shell, Sam was probably as worried and tense as any of us, and he just didn't want us to know it. He needed some solitude, and what better place to get it than the airless rocky expanse of Mare Nubium?

That's what I thought, so I didn't go out after him.

The same thing happened the next "morning" (by which I mean the time immediately after our sleep shift), and the next. The skipper would gather us together in the command module, we would each take our ceremonial tranquilizer pill and a sip of increasingly bad water, and then we would crawl back to our bunks and try to do nothing that would use up body energy or air. I found myself resenting it whenever I had to go to the toilet; I kept imagining my urine flowing straight into our water tank without reprocessing. I guess I was beginning to go crazy.

But Sam was as happy as could be: chipper, joking, laughing it up. He would disappear each morning for several hours, and then show up again with a lopsided grin on his face, telling jokes and making us all feel a little better.

Until Julio suddenly sat up in his bunk, the second or third morning after we had run out of tranquilizers, and shouted:

"Booze!"

Sam had been sitting on the edge of Julio's bunk, telling an outrageous story of what he planned to do with Sandi once we got back to Houston.

"Booze!" Julio repeated. "I smell booze! I'm cracking up. I'm losing my marbles."

For once in his life, Sam looked apologetic, almost ashamed.

"No, you're not," he said to Julio, in as quiet a voice as I've ever heard Sam speak. "I was going to tell you about it tomorrow — the stuff is almost ready for human consumption."

You never saw three grown men so suddenly attentive.

With a self-deprecating little grin, Sam explained, "I've been tinkering with the propellants and other junk out in the return module. They're not doing us any good, just sitting out there. So I made a small still. Seems to be working O.K. I tasted a couple of sips today. It'll take the enamel off your teeth, but it's not all that bad. By tomorrow...."

He never got any further. We did a Keystone Kops routine, rushing for our space suits, jamming ourselves through the air lock, and running out to the inert, idle, cussedly useless return module.

Sam was not kidding us. He had jury-rigged an honest-to-backwoods still inside the return module, fueling it

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with propellants from the module's tanks. The basic alcohol also came from the propellant, with water from the fuel cells, and few other ingredients that Sam had scrounged from miscellaneous supplies.

We lost no time pressurizing the module, lifting our helmet visors, and sampling his concoction. It was *terrible*. We loved it.

By the time we had staggered back to our barracks module, laughing and belching, we had made up our minds to let the other three guys in barracks B share in Sam's juice. But the skipper was a problem. Once he found out about it, he'd have Sam up on charges and drummed out of the agency, even before the rescue mission reached us. Old Stone Face would vote to leave Sam behind, I knew, if he found out about it.

"Have no fear," Sam told us, with a giggle. "I will, myself, reveal my activities to our noble skipper."

And before we could stop him, he had tottered off toward the command module, whistling in a horribly sour off-key way.

An hour went by. Then two. We could hear Skip's voice yelling from the command module, although we couldn't make out the words. None of us had the guts to go down the tunnel and try to help Sam. After a while the tumult and the shouting died. Micky Lee gave me a questioning glance. Silence; ominous silence.

"You think Skip's killed him?" he asked.

"More likely," said Julio, "that Sam's talked the skipper to death."

Timidly, we slunk down the tunnel to the command module. The other three guys were there with Sam and the skipper; they were all quaffing Sam's rocket juice and grinning at each other.

We were shocked, but we joined right in. Six days later, when the guys from Base Alpha landed their return module crammed with food and fresh water for us, we invited them to join the party. A week after that, when the rescue mission from Canaveral finally showed up, we had been under the influence for so long that we told them to go away.

I had never realized before then what a lawyer Sam was. He had convinced the skipper to read the medics' report carefully, especially the part where they recommended using tranquilizers to keep up calm and minimize our energy consumption. Sam had then gotten the skipper to punch up the medical definition of alcohol's effects on the body, out of Houston's medical files. Sure enough, if you squinted the right way, you could claim that alcohol was a sort of tranquilizer. That was enough justification for the skipper, and we just about pickled ourselves until we got rescued.

The crystal statue glittered under the harsh rays of the unfiltered sun. The work leader, still sitting on the lip of the truck's hatch, said:

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"It looks beautiful. You guys did a good job. Is the epoxy set?"

"Needs another few minutes," said the young man, tapping the toe of his boot against the base that they had poured on the lunar plain.

"What happened when you got back to Houston?" the young woman asked. "Didn't they get angry at you for being drunk?"

"Sure," said the leader. "But what could they do? Sam's booze pulled us through, and we could show that we were merely following the recommendation of the medics. Old Stone Face hushed it all up and we become heroes, just like Sandi told us we would be — for about a week."

"And Sam?"

"He left the astronaut corps after a while and started his own business. The rest you know about from the history books. Hero, showman, scoundrel, patriot. It's all true. He was all those things."

Did he and Sandi ever, uh ... get together?" the young man asked.

"She was too smart to let him corner her. She used one of the other guys to protect her; married him, finally. Cowboy, I think it was. They eloped and spent their honeymoon in orbit. Zero-G and all that. Sam pretended to be very upset about it, but by that time he was surrounded by women, all of them taller than he was."

The three of them walked slowly around the gleaming statue.

"Look at the rainbows it makes where the sun hits it," said the young woman. "It's marvelous."

"But if he was so smart," said the young man, "why'd he pick this spot way out here for his grave? It's miles from Selene City. You can't even see the statue from the city."

"Silly. This is the place where Base Gamma was," said the young woman. "Isn't that right?"

"No," the leader said. "Gamma was all the way over on the other side of Nubium. It's still there. Abandoned, but still there. Even the blasted return module is still sitting there, as dumb as ever."

"Then why put the statue here?"

The leader chuckled. "Sam was a pretty shrewd guy. He set up, in his will, a tourist agency that will guide people to the important sites on the Moon. They start at Selene City and go along the surface in those big black cruisers that're being built back at the city. Sam's tomb is going to be a major tourist attraction, and he wanted it far enough out in the mare so that people wouldn't be able to see it from Selene; they have to buy tickets and take the bus."

Both the young people laughed tolerantly.

"I guess he was pretty smart, at that," the young man confessed.

"And he had a long memory, too," said the leader. "He left this tourist agency to me and the other guys from *Artemis IV*, in his will. We own it. I

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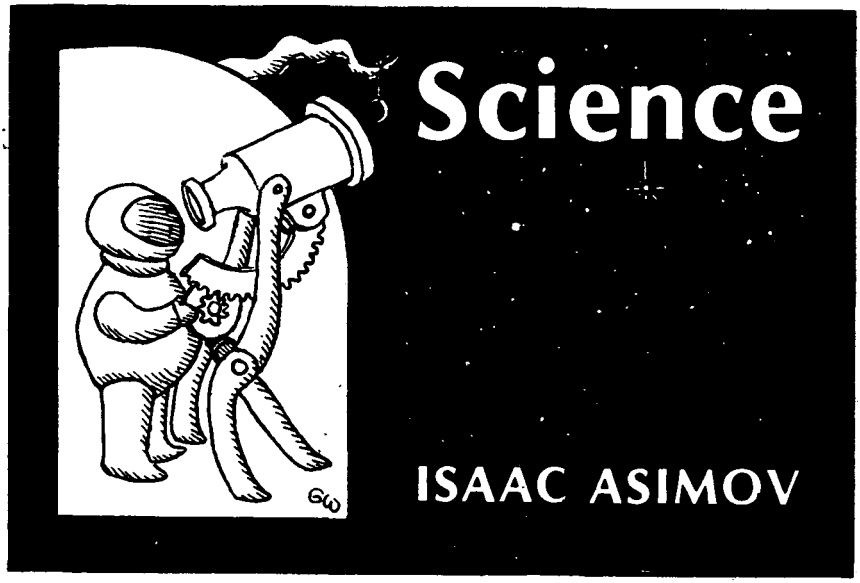

UPDATING THE SATELLITES

As one gets older, one tends to collect a variety of reputations. About the best one I've got is that of being a "nice person."

That's a pleasant reputation to have because it means that people grin at me, and pump my hand, and massage my shoulder, and let their eyes glisten with pleasure on meeting me. Young women of surpassing beauty are even likely to ask permission to kiss me.*

Nevertheless, it is a little wearying sometimes to have editors protect their property by not letting me snarl and swear and grind my teeth when I have an urgent need to.

Consider my book SATURN AND BEYOND (Lothrop, 1979). At the time I wrote it, Pluto was not known to possess a satellite. By the time the galleys arrived, the satellite had been discovered, and I dutifully added a couple of paragraphs, so that when the book appeared, the Plutonian satellite was properly ensconced within its pages.

Some time after publication, there arrived a review of the book that

I never withhold such permission. That would be rude!

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castigated me unmercifully for not including the satellite. The tone of the review was insulting in the extreme.

My editor did a little detective work, and it turned out that the reviewer had read galley proofs plainly marked "uncorrected" and was too stupid to understand that one of the purposes of galley proofs is to give the author a chance to bring material up to date.

The editor didn't want me to write to the reviewer directly for some reason. (Perhaps she knew something about the nature of my eloquence.) She suggested instead that she should be allowed to intercept the letter, and then forward it to the reviewer.

I agreed and promptly knocked out a letter explaining the situation in detail. I began with a short, Ciceronian essay on the subject of "stupidity," and then went on to discuss the symptoms and consequences of "senility," and concluded with some pleasant suggestions as to what the reviewer could do with various parts of his body.

Unfortunately (I know you will scarcely credit this), my editor refused to pass it on, but sent a milk-and-water letter of her own which left the reviewer totally unscathed.

Her excuse was that my letter didn't project my "nice person" image correctly. My heated explanation that I didn't feel like a nice person at all, but wanted to eviscerate the son of an uncertain father, fell on deaf ears.

But never mind. My books do get outdated with time, and one of the ways in which SATURN AND BEYOND got outdated (as well as an earlier sister volume JUPITER (Lothrop, 1973)) was in connection with the satellites of the Solar system. Here's my chance to update such matters.

If we begin at the Sun and work outward, it turns out that Mercury and Venus have no satellites at all, as far as we know, and it seems quite certain that none of any significant size will ever be discovered.

Earth has one satellite, the Moon, and it seems quite certain that no second satellite (of natural origin) exists that is of any significant size. The Moon is a large satellite, however; one of a total of seven in the Solar system that have diameters in excess of 3000 kilometres. It is very unlikely (barring the discovery of a gas giant beyond Pluto's orbit) that any large satellites remain to be discovered. In the last century and a third, only one new satellite (which I will get to) has been spotted that is over 200 kilometres in diameter.

Mars has two tiny satellites that have been known for a century. They have recently been photographed in detail, and that has been discussed in

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THE SONS OF MARS REVISITED (November 1977) and DARK AND BRIGHT (December 1977).

That brings us to Jupiter. It has four large satellites, which are sometimes called the "Galilean satellites" (because Galileo discovered them in 1610). One of these, Ganymede, is the largest satellite in the Solar system, with a volume 3½ times that of the Moon.

In addition to the Galilean satellites, Jupiter has a number of small satellites, and here is where the updating begins.

In 1973, when my book, JUPITER, was published, there were eight small Jovian satellites known. (I have the impulse to call them "satellettes" but I am resisting it.) The Jovian satellites are frequently numbered in the order of discovery, with the Galileans J-I to J-IV, and the small ones J-V to J-XII (as of 1973). The "J" stands for Jupiter, as you have already guessed.

In JUPITER, I gave the eight small satellites names drawn from mythology, — the same ones, by the way, that I had earlier given in my F&SF essay, ROLLCALL (December 1963). These names were unofficial at the time, but I assumed they would become official. I was wrong. Only one of the eight was kept, so I must start my updating by giving you the now official names of the eight small satellites, along with the year of discovery:

J-V	Amalthea (am-ul-THEE-uh)	1892
J-VI	Himalia (HIM-uh-lee-uh)	1904
J-VII	Elara (EE-luh-ruh)	1905
J-VIII	Pasiphae (puh-SIF-uh-ee)	1908
J-IX	Sinope (sy-NO-pee)	1914
J-X	Lysithea (LIS-ih-THEE-uh)	1938
J-XI	Carme (KAHR-mee)	1938
J—XII	Ananke (UH-nan-kee)	1951

Traditionally, the names of bodies of the Solar system are taken from Greek mythology, and these are no exceptions.

Amalthea (the only name I used earlier that was kept and finally made official) was one of the nymphs who fed the infant Zeus (Jupiter, to the Roman) on goat's milk, when he was hidden in Crete to keep him safe from the cannibalistic tendencies of his father, Cronos (Saturn). Sometimes the name is given to the goat who supplied the milk. In either case it is appropriate for the satellite that was closer than any other known Jovian satellite at the time it was discovered.

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When Zeus matured, by the way, he gave the horn of the goat to the nymph as a reward, telling her that, if she wanted anything, she had but to reach into the horn to find it. This was the original "cornucopia" (from a Latin phrase meaning "horn of plenty").

Elara was a mortal woman who caught the eye of the all embracing Zeus. He hid her underground to keep her from being discovered by the jealous Hera (Juno), who never did get used to the amorous propensities of her all powerful husband and who got her revenge by persecuting anyone he seemed to like.

According to some accounts, Elara was the mother of Tityus, a huge Earth born monster (Elara was underground, remember) who was killed by the arrows of Apollo and who, when stretched out in Tartarus, covered nine acres of ground.

Pasiphae was a daughter-in-law of Zeus, having married his son, King Minos of Crete. Pasiphae is best known for having fallen violently in love with a bull of great beauty. (There's no accounting for tastes.) She had a framework made, and over it a cow's hide was stretched. Pasiphae got inside and soon enough the bull obligingly mounted the framework. In due course, Pasiphae was delivered of a child with a bull's head that grew into the famous Minotaur.

Sinope was another young lady who was approached by the insatiable Zeus. He offered her anything she wanted in exchange for her compliance and she asked for perpetual virginity. (I told you there's no accounting for tastes.)

Carme was still another Zeusian beneficiary, and the mother of Britomartis, a Cretan patron-goddess of fishing and hunting.

Ananke differs from the rest. She is the divine personification of Fate or Necessity — the ordained playing out of events which even the gods cannot alter, so that Ananke is the one divinity that is superior to Zeus.

As for Himalia and Lysithea, I have been unable to track them down so far. If one of my Gentle Readers with a classical education has heard of them, I would welcome the information.

The eight small Jovian satellites were discovered in the order of decreasing brightness, as seems reasonable. Since all are at the same distance from Earth and are probably of similar albedo (that is, the ability to reflect light) they were discovered in the order of decreasing size. Thus, Amalthea and Himalia have diameters of about 170 kilometres, while Ananke has a diameter of perhaps 20 kilometres.

But even the largest is comparatively tiny. All eight satellites make up

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only 1/3000 the volume of Europa, the smallest of the Galileans, or 1/32,000 the volume of the four Galilean satellites put together.

Four of the small satellites are grouped together at a particularly great distance from Jupiter. They are Pasiphae, Sinope, Carme and Ananke, with average distances from Jupiter that are 20,700,000 kilometres in the case of Ananke, the nearest, and 23,370,000 kilometres in the case of Sinope, the farthest.

These satellites are very likely captured asteroids and are relatively recent additions to the Jovian family. They have not yet had time to regularize their orbits into circularity and to move into Jupiter's equatorial plane, especially since, at their distance, Jupiter's gravitational influence is comparatively weak. The satellite orbits are, therefore, strongly tilted and elliptical, and the grouping is by no means as tight as it would be if all had circular orbits and revolved in Jupiter's equatorial plane.

The most eccentric orbit is that of Pasiphae, which is rather suitable considering the eccentric sexual tastes of the mythological prototype. Pasiphae recedes to a distance of 33,200,000 kilometres from Jupiter at one end of its orbit. This is the farthest known distance of any satellite from the planet it circles. It is roughly 85 times the distance of the Moon from the Earth, for instance.

The periods of revolution of these satellites are long, well over 600 days in each case. The longest period of revolution is that of Sinope, as would be expected, since it has the greatest average distance from Jupiter. Its period is 758 days, or 2.08 years. This is nearly 28 times as long as it takes the Moon to circle the Earth, and 1.1 times as long as it takes Mars to circle the Sun.

Of the remaining small satellites, three are grouped somewhat closer to Jupiter. Himalia, Lysithea, and Elara have average distances of between 11,000,000 and 12,000,000 kilometres from Jupiter.

There is an overlap, though. Elara has an orbit that is eccentric enough for it to recede as far as 14,300,000 kilometres from Jupiter, while Pasiphae at the near end of its orbit is only 13,800,000 kilometres from Jupiter.

All seven satellites are much farther from Jupiter than the Galilean satellites are. The nearest approach of any of the seven is that of Elara which, at the near point of its orbit, is only 9,300,000 kilometres from Jupiter. This, however, is five times as far from Jupiter as Callisto, the farthest of the Galileans, ever gets.

The eighth small satellite, Amalthea, differs from all the rest in being *closer* to Jupiter than any of the Galileans are. It is at a distance of only

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180,000 kilometres from the center of Jupiter. This is not quite half the distance of Io, the closest of the Galileans, and, for that matter, not quite half the distance of the Moon from the Earth.

Impelled by the enormous gravitational field of nearby Jupiter, Amalthea is whipped about the planet in 11.95 hours, which is less than 1/50 the time it takes for the Moon to circle the Earth.

At the time I wrote JUPITER, Amalthea had the second shortest period of any known satellite. Amalthea was beaten only by Phobos, the inner of Mars's two satellites. It revolved about Mars in 7.65 hours, only 5/8 the period of Amalthea. Phobos revolved about Mars, in fact, considerably faster than Mars rotated about its axis, so that Phobos constantly overtakes the Martian surface, rising in the west and setting in the east. Since Jupiter rotates surprisingly quickly, in 9.92 hours, Amalthea does not overtake the Jovian surface but rises in the east and drifts rather slowly to the west.

Phobos, however, as it circles tiny Mars, has a much shorter orbit than that of Amalthea, which has to get about the swollen globe of mighty Jupiter. Amalthea's orbit is nearly 20 times as long as that of Phobos. Therefore, Phobos, in its orbit about Mars, moves at a speed of 2.14 kilometres per second, while Amalthea, scudding about Jupiter, moves at speed of 26.3 kilometres per second. (By comparison, the Moon moves about Earth at an average speed of just about 1 kilometre per second.)

But JUPITER was published in 1973, and in 1974, a thirteenth Jovian satellite was discovered by Earth-based observation. It was part of the Himalia group, the small satellite outside the Galileans, but not all the way outside. That increased the number of that group from three to four.

The reason this new satellite was not discovered any sooner was that it was the smallest yet. It was, in fact, only 10 kilometres across, and it remains to this day the smallest satellite to have been found.

It was named Leda (LEE-duh), who, in Greek mythology, was a queen of Sparta who was wooed by Zeus. The god took the shape of a swan for purposes of bestiality. The result was that Leda laid two eggs, and from each of these two babies emerged. The most famous of the babies was one who eventually came to be known as "Helen of Troy."

Then came the age of probes, and in 1979, three new Jovian satellites were discovered that were all closer to Jupiter than the Galilean satellites were. This made for a rather startling symmetry. There are now 16 Jovian satellites: 4 small ones closer to Jupiter than the Galileans; 4 large Galileans; 4 small ones farther than the Galileans; and 4 more small ones still farther out.

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Undoubtedly, there will be a new discovery that will break the symmetry, and I would consider that a shame, because I like symmetry.

The most recently discovered satellites, J-XIV, J-XV, and J-XVI, have estimated diameters of about 25, 80, and 40 kilometres, respectively, and one might wonder why it took so long to discover them, when Lysithea, with a diameter of only 20 kilometres, was discovered as long ago as 1938.

The answer is that these nearby satellites are drowned out in the light of giant Jupiter and cannot be seen except by the close in view of the probes. Amalthea, the only nearby satellite to be detected from Earth, is 170 kilometres across, far larger than the others, and was discovered in 1892 by an astronomer of almost legendary sharpness of vision.

The only one of these new satellites to have an official name so far is J-XIV, which is Adrastea (uh-DRAS-tee-uh), the name of another nymph who took care of the infant Zeus, along with Amalthea.

The nearest of all the satellites to Jupiter (as far as is now known) is J-XVI, which is only 128,000 kilometres from the planet's center, though Adrastea is a close second at 129,000 kilometres. The period of revolution of J-XVI is 7.07 hours, while that of Adrastea is 7.13 hours. They have taken the record away from Phobos, since they negotiate their trip around their planet in half an hour less than Phobos does.

The orbital speed of these two innermost Jovian satellites is a speedy 31.6 kilometres per second, and both outrace the speed of rotation of Jupiter. If anyone could watch those satellites from Jovian cloud surface, they would seem, like Phobos, to rise in the west and set in the east.

Now let's move on to Saturn. Through the first seven decades of the 20th Century, it was thought to have 9 satellites. One of them, the sixth counting outward from Saturn, is a large satellite named Titan. (In volume it is second only to Ganymede, and is even more remarkable in that it is the only satellite known to have an atmosphere — and one at least as thick as that of Earth, too.) Titan has about ten times the volume of all the other Saturnian satellites taken together.

The other Saturnian satellites, while considerably smaller than Titan, are all larger than any of the Jovian satellites other than the Galileans. Rhea (REE-uh) has a diameter of 1530 kilometres, for instance, and Iapetus (i-AP-uh-tus) one of 1460 kilometres. The smallest of the nine Saturnian satellites is Phoebe (FEE-bee), which is the farthest out, and, not surprisingly, considering its size, was the latest discovered. It is about 220 kilometres in diameter and was first spotted in 1898. (The names of the

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Saturnian satellites are given and explained in ROLLCALL, which I mentioned earlier. The names of the satellites of the planets beyond Saturn are also given there — with one exception.)

Why does Saturn lack the really small satellites that Jupiter has in profusion? The obvious explanation is that Saturn is twice as far from us as Jupiter is, and that the smaller satellites would therefore be correspondingly more difficult to see. They exist, probably, but remain undetected.

In 1967, a small Saturnian satellite was reported and named Janus, something I described in LITTLE FOUND SATELLITE (October 1968). Alas, it turned out to be an error, and in this essay, I bring myself up to date in that matter — cancel Janus!

In 1980, however, probes photographing Saturn from close-up located no fewer than eight new Saturnian satellites, every one of them smaller than Phoebe. The largest of the eight is slightly less than 200 kilometres in diameter, while the smallest are only about 15 kilometres in diameter, on the average. None of the eight has yet been given a name.

Five of the eight newly-discovered Saturnian satellites are closer to Saturn than Mimas (MI-mus) is; (Mimas is the closest of the long-established satellites, having been detected first in 1789 and is some 390 kilometres in diameter).

The closest of the now known Saturnian satellites is only 137,000 kilometres from Saturn's center (not quite as close as the closest Jovian satellites are to their planet). It circles Saturn in 14.43 hours. This is twice the period of the closest Jovian satellites, but then Saturn, being smaller than Jupiter, has a less intense gravitational field.

Of the five nearby Saturnian satellites, the two least nearby offered something astonishing and, in fact, until then, unprecedented. They are *co-orbital*. That is, they share the same orbit, chasing each other around Saturn endlessly. They are at a distance of 151,000 kilometres from Saturn and revolve in a period of 16.68 hours. It was these two satellites, mistaken for a single body, that was probably reported as Janus in 1967.

The three remaining newly discovered Saturnian satellites, which occur within the system of the nine long known satellites, represent other unprecedented situations.

The long known satellite Dione (di-O-nee), first spotted in 1684, was found to have a unsuspected tiny co-orbital companion. Whereas Dione has a diameter of 1120 kilometres, the companion (which it would make sense to call Dione-B) has a diameter of only about 30 kilometres. Dione-B circles Saturn at a point 60° ahead of Dione, so that Saturn, Dione, and

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Dione-B are at the apices of an equilateral triangle. This is a "Trojan situation" (see THE TROJAN HEARSE, December 1961).

Until 1980, the only known examples of the Trojan situation involved the Sun, Jupiter, and certain asteroids which were co-orbital with Jupiter. Some of the these asteroids circle the Sun 60° ahead of Jupiter in the "L-4" position, and some 60° behind Jupiter in the "L-5" position.

Dione-B is in the L-4 position with respect to Dione.

Even more astonishing is the case of Tethys (TEE-this), which was discovered in the same year as Dione and is 1060 kilometres in diameter. The two remaining newly discovered Saturnian satellites, each 25 kilometres across, are *both* co-orbital with Tethys. One, Tethys-B is in the L-4 position with respect to it, and the other, Tethys-C is in the L-5 position.

Clearly, the Saturnian satellite family is the richest and most complex in the Solar system as far as we now know. This is probably part of the same phenomenon that gives Saturn the most spectacular rings in the Solar system. However, I will leave the task of updating Saturn's rings for a future essay.

Uranus and Neptune have had no new satellite discoveries in the last third of a century (not having been probed yet) though Uranus's rings have recently been discovered (see RINGS AND THINGS, August 1978).

Uranus has five satellites. Four have been known for over a century and have diameters in the 1000 and 2000 kilometre range. The fifth is Miranda (mih-RAN-duh), closer and smaller than the others. It was first detected in 1948, has a diameter of about 300 kilometres and circles Uranus at a distance of about 130,000 kilometres.

Neptune has two satellites. One is a large satellite, Triton (TRI-ton), with a diameter of about 4400 kilometres, so that it is larger than our Moon. It was detected only a few weeks after Neptune itself was discovered.

Neptune's second satellite, Nereid (NEER-ee-id), was discovered in 1949 and also has a diameter of about 300 kilometres. Nereid is remarkable for having the most eccentric orbit of any satellite. At one end of its orbit it swoops in as close as 1,390,000 kilometres to Neptune and at the other end recedes to a distance of 9,734,000 kilometres.

What's more, the latest figure I can find on the orbital period of Nereid, makes that out to be 365.21 days, or 0.9999 years.

Imagine what might have happened if Neptune and Nereid were visible to the unaided eye and human beings could watch the latter circling the former. It wouldn't have taken long for even prehistoric men to realize that

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Nereid was marking off the cycle of the seasons with great precision.

We would have ended up with nice "Neptunian calendar," complete with leap years, long before the Neolithic. Heaven only knows how that would have stimulated mathemathics, science and technology, and where we would now be as a result.

If that had happened, the existence of Nereid would have been considered a clear example of the benign providence of God and scientists would have been hard put to it to say, "Oh, it's just coincidence." However, since benign providence arranged to have this astonishing coincidence invisible until our present generation the matter does not arise.

Oddly enough, the most astonishing satellite discovery of the last few years has had nothing to do with probes. It was made from Earth's surface. On June 22, 1978, it was found that Pluto, the most distant of the planets, had a satellite. It was named Charon (KEHR-on) after the ferryman who carried the shades of the dead across the River Styx and into Pluto's kingdom of Hades.

The satellite turned out to be surprisingly large; it seems to be about 1300 kilometres in diameter.

The diameter of Pluto itself has been a matter of dispute since it was discovered in 1930. Before its discovery, it was assumed that another outer planet would be a gas giant like the rest. Once discovered, Pluto was found to be surprisingly dim, so that it had to be smaller than expected. With every new assessment, its size shrank. It began to seem no larger than Earth, then no larger than Mars.

Once Charon was discovered, the total mass of Pluto and Charon could be calculated from the period of revolution, and the distance between them. From the comparative brightness of the two, the separate masses could be determined and, assuming the density to be that of ice, the diameter could be estimated. It turned out that Pluto has a diameter of about 3000 kilometres, and is therefore just a bit smaller than Europa, the smallest of the large satellites.

Now for a sidelight—

Each planet is more voluminous than all its satellite material. Mercury and Venus are infinitely more voluminous than their satellites, since they have none, while Mars is 15,500,000 times as voluminous as its two satellites taken together. Jupiter is about 8500 times as voluminous as all its satellites put together, and Saturn is about 8800 times as voluminous as its satellite system.

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Uranus does a little better, having no large satellites, and is about 10,000 times as voluminous as its satellite system. Neptune, with a larger satellite, and being, itself, the smallest of the four large gas giants, does somewhat worse and is only about 1350 times as large as its two satellites taken together.

We might conclude from this record of seven of the nine planets that it is a cosmic law that any planet must be at least 1000 times as voluminous as all its satellites put together.

But then we come to Earth, and, behold!, Earth is only 50 times as voluminous as the Moon.

Earthpeople are rightly proud of this, and owning such a large satellite has been very useful, considering how it has helped in the intellectual advance of the human species (see THE TRIUMPH OF THE MOON, June 1973). We consider ourselves to be the nearest approach to a double planet in the Solar system, and I even published a book once about the Earth-Moon system, which I called THE DOUBLE PLANET (Abelard-Schuman, 1960).

Well, here's a case where I have to update even the title of a book, for Pluto is only *12* times as voluminous as its satellite, and Pluto-Charon is a far closer approach to a double planet than Earth-Moon is.

Too bad.

(GENTLE READERS: Just a note to tell you that this is my 300th essay, and that with this I complete my twenty-fifth year as science essayist for F&SF, without having missed an issue. You may be tired of these essays by now, but I'm not, so you're stuck with them.)

(From page 129)

figure it'll keep me comfortable for the rest of my life."

"Why did he do that?"

The leader shrugged inside his cumbersome suit. "Why did he build that still? Sam always did what he darned well felt like doing. No matter what you think of him, he always remembered his friends."

The three of them gave the crystal statue a final admiring glance, then clumped back to the truck and started the hour-long drive to Selene City.

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This compelling story about a farmer in Oklahoma — not quite our Oklahoma — and his mystical thirst for the sea is Michael Bishop's first here since "Murder on Lupozny Station," April 1981. Mr. Bishop won the 1982 Nebula award for his novel NO ENEMY BUT TIME (Timescape), beating out new books by Asimov, Heinlein, Wolfe and others.

And the Marlin Spoke

BY
MICHAEL BISHOP

I

Before the boat that Hendrikson had rented at the Sacred Heart Marina in Cuerpo Divino, the sea surged and subsided like a living thing.

"How far out do you want to go?" Sister Alejandra asked her pilgrim passenger. From the sunset off to starboard her hair reflected an antique-gold sheen. In another twenty or thirty minutes the darkness would be complete, and every hour until dawn, according to the Pelagian brochures, would be an hour of deep-water communion. If, that is, you believed. ...

"Past these damned Immersionists," Hendrikson replied, gripping the port gunwale. "They give me the creeps."

His eyes swept the nightmare scene. Thousands of Immersionists — men, women, and children, many of the last not much more than infants — bobbed about in the waters lapping the jetties and inlets of the marina. Thousands more either dog-paddled purposely or drifted in lackadaisical schools in the deeper currents farther out to divinity. You could not look in any direction without finding a human head — dozens of human heads — cresting the swells, sinking briefly out of sight, miraculously reappearing. The coastal tides of New Castile teemed with a variety of believer utterly alien to Hendrikson's experience.

"They're not damned," Sister Alejandra corrected him. "Quite the opposite, I'd say. Quite the opposite."

"Blessed or damned, Sister, they're the worst sort of fanatic. The very worst."

The pilot's eyes danced with an indigo dazzle. "What sort does that make

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me, Mr. Hendrikson? The better?"

"The prettier," he said under his breath, so that she could not hear him. If he had to have a licensed ecclesiastic of the Pelagian sect convey him outward from shore (and that was the rule), Hendrikson was glad to have drawn one with wit and good looks, for the standard professional allotments of saintliness and zeal did not impress him. Moreover, wit and good looks seemed to be in short supply in New Castile — although, to be fair, he had only his dizzying observations over the last thirty hours to judge by. Three days ago he had been busy sowing wheat on his farm in White Sky, Oklahoma, twelve hundred miles away.

Meanwhile, with the skill of a seasoned hand, Sister Alejandra was easing the *Baptista*, her pretty little boat, through the salt-buoyed throngs of Immersionists. She seemed to be trying her best not to collide with or swamp them. Her care and compassion notwithstanding, Hendrikson saw a dead teenage girl emerge from beneath the hull and turn bleeding and whey-faced into the phosporescent wake of the *Baptista*. Others of the devout had drowned long since and were floating belly-up like giant catfish or carp. The incompatible reeks of kelp and salted human flesh lay heavily over the nearer inshore waters. Hendrikson watched the dead girl pass from his view into a ring of believers who, while treading water, sang a Castilian chantey-mass. Listening to this eerie dirge, he dug into his pocket for a handkerchief with which to cover his nose.

"Miles out," he said through the muffling linen. "As far out from these fanatics as they'll let you go."

The bobbing heads, whether of living devotees or of tide-racked corpses, were fewer now. The *Baptista* picked up speed. The stench of the coast receded. The sun disappeared utterly, the night congealed over the Gulf of Mexico, and the undulant body of Sister Alejandra's God — the Cuerpo Divino after which the port city of her order had been named — carried her boat, herself, and her passenger to the meeting for which he had skeptically paid the charter fee.

II

Three days ago Thomas Hendrikson had been busy sowing wheat on his farm near White Sky, Oklahoma, twelve hundred miles away. The pressure to visit either New Castile or Santa Pacifica, however, had been building in him for at least a year. Over this disquieting twelvemonth, intimations of the sea — of living water, white-sand beaches, and either lovely or bizarre marine fauna — had assulted him many times.

For one thing, of course, the nation's coastal areas were almost always on the news; you caught glimpses of the oceans and their attendant animal life as a visual obbligato to the major

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human story of the decade, the spread of the religious doctrine known as Thalassicism and its subsequent quicksilver splintering into literally hundreds of competing or complementary denominations. (*Cults*, most newscasters and orthodox religionists called them, and that's the way landlocked Heartlanders invariably thought of them, too.) But television was not the whole of it for Tom Hendrikson: he had vivid dreams and unusual waking visions to go with the news reports, and these, being private, fretted him a good deal more. He felt that some uncomprising oceanic power was astir in his blood, for purposes that did not coincide with his own, and the upheaval that this power threatened was something he did not want to think about. His present life satisfied him. He did not want to lose it.

The change had begun innocently enough. One autumn morning, riding high in the air-conditioned cab of his Elksmith combine, Hendrikson had looked out over the vast yellow sea of wheat surrounding him — only to find superimposed upon it an image of an actual seascape, with long glinting swells and a cold mirror brightness that almost blinded him. He cocked his head. The image did not go away. He was harvesting not wheat but water. A pitiless panic sat down on his chest. His hands fumbled frantically with the Elksmith's computerized controls. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the vision vanished, and he was adrift once more in a sea of nodding grain. For the rest of the day, however, he kept cocking his head and squinting sidelong, fearful that the terrible lineaments of the sea would again overwhelm the comforting tangibility of his crop.

Sarah, Hendrikson's wife, said later that this vision had come upon him as a response to the summer's protracted drought. Irrigation — in their case, a system of spindly elevated sprinklers on wheels — had saved them, but the costs had been enormous. Hence Tom's vision from the cab of the Elksmith. When you wanted rain, your mind quite naturally leaped the arid prairies of Oklahoma and Misaskas to arrive at a lake or an ocean. Besides, neither of the Hendriksons had been more than two hundred miles from home since their wedding trip nine years ago, and maybe Tom needed to take a well-deserved leave of absence from his farm duties. If they could get Mrs. McQuillan to look after the boys, Sarah would be happy to join him; she wanted a vacation, too. White Sky had character, certainly, but no glamor, and only folks with concrete in their souls could stay forever in the same place without once wondering about the Great World Beyond.

"There's too much to do around here," Hendrikson told his wife, dismissing her suggestions along with her analysis. And there was. Even if Mrs. McQuillan agreed to board and babysit the boys, he would have to hire

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someone to oversee the farm's remaining harvest transactions. A second wedding trip was out of the question right now.

But the idea of a trip — a trip to the sea — stuck in Hendrikson's mind, in spite of all his well-reasoned struggles against the notion, and took on a crazy life of its own. The idea became an impulse, the impulse became an urge, and the urge an inner compulsion that, in moments of daytime torpor, he pretended did not really exist. Other prods kept goosing the compulsion, however, and some of these were quietly dramatic.

Showering one evening in late fall, liquefying the red dirt on his hands and forearms with a bar of gritty soap, Hendrikson looked down. The swirl of water between his feet fascinated him. It spiraled around the metal cap on the drain opening like something living, an endless crystal snake feeding its length back into the great hidden aquifer from which it had sprung, dragging with it a delicate scrum of soap lather, a small portion of Oklahoma's topsoil, and, inevitably, some of Hendrikson's own skin. What an odd sensation. If he stood here long enough, sloughing dead body cells and rubbing away calluses, Sarah, when she finally came through the bathroom door to see about him, would find no trace of her husband — only the musical sibilance of shower water slithering its way into the bowels of the continent. Hendrikson wondered at this thought. It was almost perverse. Then he realized that the water between his feet was spinning *clockwise* down the drain. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, that constituted a slap at the laws of physics; it was supposed to go the *other* way.

Hendrikson wrapped a towel around his dripping flanks and hurried to fetch Sarah to corroborate this uncanny phenomenon. When they peered into the shower stall together, however, the swirl had mysteriously reversed itself.

"I saw it," he protested.

"I know you did," Sarah reassured him. "Maybe it was an earth tremor or an atmospheric thing — something like that, anyway."

A sign, thought Hendrikson, but he did not say the word aloud. He finished drying himself, dressed for dinner, and talked enthusiastically at table of the chances of the Wichita Bombers against the Galveston Gulls in the forthcoming World Series. The boys joined in, but Sarah, over the reheated corned beef and cabbage, eyed him suspiciously. She had no more idea of what was happening to him than he did, and her uncertainty seemed to anger as well as frighten her.

During a welcome stretch of false spring in January, Hendrikson drove his pickup to a piece of acreage dominated by a man-made pond. Its surface had recently thawed, and the mud around its banks was firming up around the broken hoofprints of Hendrikson's cattle. He had only a few

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head, but he was conscientious in checking up on them in bad or borderline weather. This afternoon they were elsewhere, and he paused to study the pond, which reflected upward at him only pale sky and emaciated drifting clouds.

Quite unexpectedly a shape appeared above the seamless pond water. It had a chestnut-colored body, graceful wings, and a bill with an underslung pouch almost as roomy as its abdomen. With its wings extended, this phantom made a narrow circuit of the pond, tilting first to this side and then to that, its two-dimensional double in the water skating along beneath it like its disembodied soul.

Hendrikson watched this performance with astonished eyes. The bird was a pelican. It had popped into view without any fanfare or preamble, and now, equally unexpectedly, it was beating its powerful wings on an upward arc that would carry it directly over his pickup. He had to turn around 180 degrees to follow the creature's flight, but when he shielded his eyes against the glare on the horizon, the pelican disappeared into the high whiteness almost as if it had no more substance than its shadow on the pond.

"A pelican," Hendrikson declared an hour later. "A pelican."

"Great Salina City has sea gulls," Sarah pointed out. "Maybe, after all, it's not such an unusual thing — to see here."

"Great Salina City doesn't have pelicans, Sarah, not unless you're counting the ones in the zoo. And this one — this pelican today — it was a species common to New Castile and the Gulf of Mexico. I've seen them on the news."

"Maybe you have. But what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure. It's not a reaction to last summer's drought, though, or a yearning for a second wedding trip. It's just another sign of the *thirst* growing in me, Sarah — a thirst for the sea."

"Salt water isn't going to quench your thirst, Tom." Sarah's reply made a neat epigram, but otherwise completely missed the point of what he had just witnessed. She had been angry with him for rejecting her first romantic interpretations of his malaise. Now she was even angrier for his excluding her from this worrisome mystical thirst. She thought a long weekend in Wichita or Utavah Springs would cure him of it. That was precisely where she was wrong.

Hendrikson did not know what to say to his wife. If, later on, he did actually visit New Castile or Santa Pacifica, he did not believe that Sarah should accompany him. The people along the coasts had life-styles and belief systems at striking variance with those favored in the Heartland, beachcombery and Thalassicism not the least outrageous among them. Moreover, secessionist sentiment was now so strong in the Far West that recently a

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group of militant Joaquinistas had set up an armed roadblock on the Utavah border. Within the week Federal Guardians had forcibly reopened the highway, but only after a pitched battle and dismaying losses on both sides. How could any sensible person think of taking a loved one into so unpredictable a region of the country? As for New Castile, a more stable and somewhat less populous state, its inhabitants were known to regard visitors either as prey for their many gaudy commercial enterprises or as potential converts. Indeed, they hoped you were both. Sarah, a lifelong Wesleyanite, would despise such people.

One night, nearly a month after the pelican incident, Sarah thought to ask her husband a question: "You don't really—?"

"I don't really what?"

"Believe that it's true? All the tiresome business about the godliness of the sea. All that silly return-of-Poseidon rot."

"I don't know. It's gone to work in me, though."

"Listen, Tom, it's a metaphor that's gotten out of hand. Everyone has religious feelings — feelings of awe, of human insignificance — looking out over an ocean. God *wants* us to have such feelings."

Hendrikson thought about this. "Maybe we're living in apostolic times again," he finally said. "Something very important's happening, but we're out on the edge of it, disbelieving by rote. I keep thinking we're like a couple of Chinese coolies in a rice paddy thousands of miles from Jerusalem accidentally catching winds of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. We don't believe a word of it because we're too far away to witness His Passion ourselves, and the only apostle we've met looks, talks, and acts funny. Suppose that were the case, Sarah."

"We'd be saved if we believed," she replied at once. "Our distance from the Event doesn't lessen its effectiveness."

"Right," Hendrikson said. "Exactly right."

"But this is different, Tom. The believers in Thalassicism are localizing God in a completely different way. It's blasphemous on the face. If you ask me, it's downright stupid, too."

" 'God is alive, and His body is the sea.' "

"The Creator of the Universe licking the cruddy oil-clabbered beaches of Jersey and Laguna Madre?" Sarah scoffed. "God's out of Nature and out of Time, Tom. He's got a billion or more galaxies to oversee."

"What about Jesus?"

"What about Him?"

"If God could incarnate Himself as man, why couldn't He just as easily infuse a portion of Himself into the oceans of this planet? An all-powerful, omnipresent deity shouldn't have any trouble doing that."

"O.K, but what for?"

"A reminder, maybe. Or a revelation."

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Sarah regarded her husband with a rapt commingling of wonder and disappointment. "You *do* believe it, don't you?"

"It's gone to work in me. That's all I can say."

It had indeed. He felt pursued. Dust billowing on the roadways between his and his neighbor's farms made him think of luminous sea spray. His dreams, which he never recalled with any conviction or accuracy, placed him in submarine grottoes of living coral, or in the holds of sunken ships from the era of classical antiquity, or in the crowded lifeboats of great modern vessels gone afoul of icebergs or down in hurricanes. He could not walk down a bean row without hearing surf noises or the piping cries of invisible gulls. White Sky, although a dusty hamlet on the Northern Columbian plains, was no haven from the sea change taking place in him. Willy-nilly, come tide or tornado, he was transfigured. ...

In April, the cruelest month, Hendrikson made a discovery that emphasized this fact. It sealed his decision, still unrevealed to Sarah, to visit Cuerpo Divino immediately after sowing the first wheat crop of the season. He was *meant* to go, and to go alone, and Sarah would have to bear his absence with wifely obedience and Wesleyanite charity. Only a fool or a blind man would ignore a sign of the magnitude and bluntness of this latest one.

Crossing a plank bridge over a dry creekbed, Hendrikson caught sight of a slab of greenish rock on which an engraving of a peculiarly deliberate sort shone in the sun. He climbed down from his tractor, eased himself over the edge of the little bridge, and picked his way throught the debris on the creek bottom to the anomalous outcropping of shale.

Here he squatted. The engraving on the greenish stone was the body outline of a fishlike creature nearly ten feet long, each of its bones so sharply etched that Hendrikson at first believed that they had been chiseled there. He imagined some deft anonymous craftsman working meticulously to achieve this effect. Then he understood that he was beholding a fossil specimen of an ancient marine life form rather than a prehistoric human artifact. This was God's work, not man's, and it made his eyes grow moist and his chest expand as if he had received an award for which he had long considered himself ineligible.

Another thing about the fossil: inside the large fish's body, in the caudal area, the skeletal imprint of a much smaller individual asserted itself. Was this the last meal of the host creature? Or was it, instead, the doomed get of the larger, preserved in its death throes as the sinuous female parent was so movingly preserved in hers? The latter, Hendrikson felt. Millions upon millions of years after the Event, countless millennia after the commonplace trag-

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edy that had ended two otherwise insignificant animal lives, a piece of rock in a dry Oklahoma creekbed bore witness to their suffering. God had recorded their passion on a tablet of shale.

Hendrikson notified a paleontologist at Great Plains College in western Misaskas, seventy miles away. She visited the site, took dozens of pictures, and received permission to transport the entire outcropping to the Museum of Natural History in Denver. The fossil, she informed the Rocky Mountain press corps, represented a variety of ichthyosaur, or early marine reptile, known by the scientific name *Eurhinosaurus* because of the sword-like projection of the upper jaw. No other such specimen had ever been found in Northern Columbia (most of them came from fine-grained shales of Early Jurassic age in Austrio-Swabia), a failure not greatly surprising when you considered the fact that until Hendrikson's find the scientific community had had not a scrap of evidence that sea water had once covered this particular section of the Great Plain. Indeed, for just this reason many paleontologists viewed the Hendrikson fossil as a plant if not an outright counterfeit. Their arguments made no difference to the man himself.

Counterfeit, plant, or bona fide fossil, it was in any case a sign; and Tom Hendrikson left for the Gulf Coast of New Castile in early June aboard a Columbia Traveler bus full of nervous tourist-pilgrims.

III

Cuerpo Divino appalled Hendrikson. It was a city of stucco and neon in which the recruiting centers of various Thalassicist sects vied openly with one another for tourist money and converts. Billboards, bullhorns, and aggressive street solicitation greeted the bewildered visitor on every corner. Over here was an Immersionist tabernacle of polarized glass, over there a tent of blue and green sailcloth belonging to the First Church of the Revived Poseidon. Day and night, the place jangled. The immemorial sighing of the nearby ocean could not be heard over the electronically amplified chantey-hymns, the wild-eyed beatitude barkers, and the endless streams of motorized traffic going up and down The Strip. Hendrikson watched in numb disbelief as two bare-breasted girls costumed as mermaids weaved past him on a Formosan motorscooter.

Worse, the city stank. Cuerpo Divino (it soon occurred to most visitors) might have been more fittingly christened Cuerpo Muerto. Between the stucco temples and the wooden bait-and-relic shops on the beach you could see the Immersionists taking their daily baths in the purifying body of God. Recreational swimmers could not compete with them. They had staked out the shoreward waters as their own, and although regular patrols of the

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Guardia de Dios kept a few lanes open for fishing vessels and excursion boats, the most fervid sect members often gladly suffered disembowelment by a propeller blade to fulfill their spiritual ambition of dying at sea. And those under the implacable sentence of cancer or other terminal illnesses came to the gulf with the declared intention of either passing away immersed or undergoing an eleventh-hour cure. The results? Monumental sanitation problems along the quays and the pervasive salt-sweet stench of death over the entire Strip. Locals took these annoyances in stride and tourists tried to adjust to them. Hendrikson saw a woman who had occupied an aisle seat on his bus eating cotton candy over the tide-stranded body of a child. Every now and again, as if it were a jellyfish, she would nudge the pathetic corpse with her toe.

In Cuerpo Divino such sights were commonplace.

Hendrikson had used his bus trip to read about the various Thalassicist denominations in New Castile. The most respectable of the lot seemed to be the Pelagians, who maintained convents and monasteries in every major port on the Gulf. They supported themselves by taking pilgrims to sea in charter boats and holding austere worship services miles from land. Each member of the sect was a licensed pilot, and no one wishing to go to sea for any purpose could venture beyond the twelve-mile limit without a Pelagian aboard either to navigate or to provide the continuing benediction of his or her presence. Celibacy was not an essential part of the Pelagian code, but men and women ordinarily lived in separate cloisters for seven months out of every year, alternating their months of residence as they and their superiors saw fit. As a result, children were not an unaccustomed sight in the courtyards and corridors of either Pelagian convents or Pelagian monasteries.

In Cuerpo Divino, a convent. As soon as he had disembarked in the bus station Hendrikson asked directions to the convent. But because he chose to walk The Strip, just to get a reading on its gamy religiosity, it was late afternoon by the time he reached the place.

Near the Sacred Heart Marina, the convent resembled a series of barracks in an outdated pseudo-Spanish architectural style. Arches and weeping willows lent the establishment a gracefulness and a sense of repose absent from most of the structures of The Strip, but sightseers and would-be pilgrims crowded the central courtyard and Hendrikson had to stand in line for two hours to tell a sister of the order what he wanted. This woman had the knobby features of a peasant in a painting by Bosch or Brueghel and a curtness of manner that briefly convinced Hendrikson that all she wanted from him was his money.

"A boat for one person costs more."

"I'll pay it," he replied.

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"If you sign on with a party of six from Pinetucky, you can go out tonight. There's a small extra charge for squeezing you in."

"This is a solitary pilgrimage, Sister."

"Tomorrow evening, then — that's the earliest we can accommodate you."

"Where do I spend the night?"

"Here. In our tourist hostel. If you can pay, of course."

"I can pay."

And so he spent a bad night in a damp concrete room packed from floor to ceiling with insomniac pilgrims like himself. Those few who slept snored or whickered or talked unintelligibly, while those who lay awake did periodic combat with their mildewed bedding. That he could have even believed New Castile a latter-day Holy Land, a Mecca for landlocked Gentiles like himself, mortified Hendrikson. He had not died, but aboard a double-decker Columbia Traveler bus he had come straight to Hell. He had paid for the ticket himself. What folly. If it meant anything, it meant that nobody alive today had apostolic credentials, and maybe that the God who had died in Jerusalem two thousand years ago had died for good. More than likely He had been a madman with a lunatic ambition similar to Hendrikson's. As for the cultists in New Castile and Santa Pacifica, they were all — every last one of them — as crazy as loons. They had turned the world into a cataclysmic freak show.

"*Eurhinosaurus*," Hendrikson murmured to himself. "Mother and child. A tablet from the book of Time."

He made a chant of these words. They did not restore his faith, but they did enable him to get through the night.

The following day Hendrikson voluntarily restricted his movements to the grounds of the Pelagian convent. To discover who his pilot would be and which boat would carry him into the Gulf Stream for communion, he had to await the outcome of a lottery. To while away this time, then, he wrote letters vilifying the people and institutions of New Castile and warning his neighbors and friends to refrain from following him on pilgrimages of their own. A strange doubt — a kind of grudging charity — kept him from posting these letters, and at five o'clock a Pelagian abbess appeared in the quadrangle to tell him that Sister Alejandra would be pleased to accompany him on his voyage to deepwater divinity.

IV

They lay at anchor in the holy darkness, leagues from land, becalmed by Sister Alejandra's faith. Hendrikson paced the cluttered deck with his hands in his armpits. For the past half hour his stomach had been doing sluggish somersaults.

"Don't you feel a little better, Mr. Hendrikson?"

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"Your God makes me queasy, Sister. Literally sick."

"That's a physical response, not a spiritual one. Don't confuse God's eternal essence with His finite temporal body."

Hendrikson halted by the pilot's chair and stared at the woman. Nobody in White Sky talked like that, not even Wesleyanite ministers, the majority of whom were content to preach on Sunday and, every three or four weeks in good weather, to preside avuncularly over covered-dish dinners. Their evangelism had a practical core that most folks found reassuring.

"I won't feel better until I've gone home and completely forgotten this nonsense," he told the sister. A moment later he added, "Or maybe until Old Neptune condescends to show Himself."

Sister Alejandra smiled. Like the diatoms floating in the water around the *Baptista*, her smile seemed to be self-illuminating. "You're sitting in His lap," she said quietly.

Hendrikson snorted contemptuously and began to pace again. "I don't know why I came, Sister. I swear to you, I really don't."

"You were called. That's why most people — the lucky ones, anyway — make the pilgrimage. We've read about your inland ichthyosaur even here in New Castile, Mr. Hendrikson. Abbess Florinda made the connection this afternoon when she was processing the lottery results."

"H_2O."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your God's nothing but H_2O, Sister — with a healthy pinch of sodium chloride thrown in as flavoring."

"Is that what you think? Really?"

Hendrikson did not reply.

"If it is, then you, Mr. Hendrikson, are nothing more than the sum of the chemicals physically constituting you. Materialism's a philosophy that—"

"Spare me, Sister. You're not debating metaphysics with a schoolboy."

The pilot rose and crossed to the opposite gunwale. "You sometimes make me forget that," she said distinctly. Hendrikson glanced at her, on the tip of his tongue a riposte that the young woman's sudden devotional attitude made him suppress. She had let herself slip into a light trance, a prayerful reverie, and her eyes seemed to be peering out over the water — God's coruscating skin — with superhuman understanding and calm.

Sister Alejandra was not just pretty. She was beautiful. Her faith made her beautiful. Hendrikson did not desire her. He envied her. He envied her faith. He envied her this solemn, unequivocal moment of communion with her God — even if, as seemed all too likely, it were the product of a ritual self-hypnosis that briefly obliterated her own personality. And because he envied her the moment, he could not prevent himself from intruding upon it.

"Sister, when am I going to get my

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money's worth? When is this palpable God of yours going to let me know that *He* knows I'm here?"

The pilot continued to stare out to sea. If she had heard him, she chose not to acknowledge the fact.

Hendrikson crossed the deck and touched her on the shoulder.

Sister Alejandra shifted her gaze to meet him. Apparently weighing the consequences of a direct reply, she studied him as if from a great distance. Her immense indigo pupils gleamed with the reflected nebulosity of the Milky Way. Her passenger from the Heartland found himself swimming in those whirlpools.

"My money's worth," he managed. "That's all I want."

Shrugging his hand away without seeming to reject his touch outright, Sister Alejandra turned again to the midnightish membrane of the sea. "Holy God," she said, apostrophizing the waters, "this is Thomas Hendrikson of White Sky, Oklahoma. Having grown up inland, he doubts Your divinity. At the same time, the faith of his fathers no longer persuades him, and he believes that nothing but his own sweat has secured for his family and him the daily blessing of bread and shelter. Cow manure has more reality for this Doubting Thomas than the worldwide ebb and flow of the Cuerpo Divino—"

"Just a minute!" the Doubting Thomas cried.

Sister Alejandra laughed. Her trance was broken, and Hendrikson wondered now if she had simply been feigning that mysterious state.

"Please don't make mock of me, Sister. I've come a long way."

"Further than you know," she replied. Then she laughed again. "That was supposed to be funny, that cow-manure comment. Don't you Heartlanders have a sense of humor about bigoted coastal stereotyping of your life-styles? We do — about yours of us, I mean."

"No stereotype of mine was as incredible as what I witnessed in Cuerpo Divino, Sister. It beggared belief."

She shrugged. "I'm not an Immersionist. I don't despise or denigrate their ways, but I believe you have to come to deep water for truly meaningful communion. That's why we're here."

Hendrikson looked about. They lay too far from shore to see its garish neon glow, but off to starboard the running lights of several other charter boats told him they were not alone in their search for communion.

"I want my sign."

The pilot spread her arms and spoke to the sea: "Although You could strike him dead as easily as exorcise his doubt, give my passenger a sign. Show him that which he needs to be shown."

In the starlight beyond the vessel's prow a marlin leaped, only to fall back into the obsidian waters with a heavy splash. For an instant, though, it had

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hung suspended in the night, mounted against the velvet blackness in a radiance of mortal energy so commanding that Hendrikson's heart had leaped with the fish. A blue marlin, one of the larger species of the marlin group. Then the sea was without rent again, the night unriven by wonder.

"There," said Sister Alejandra.

Although half in awe of the great fish's balletic leap, Hendrikson told himself that this could not be such an uncommon occurrence in the gulf — even if the event, altogether coincidentally, *had* followed hard upon the sister's wry invocation. Now, if a jade-eyed tiger or a headstrong ebony stallion pawing the air with its hooves had burst the surface of the sea, *that* would count for something....

Sister Alejandra appeared to read this thought on his face: "You don't require another, do you?"

"Marlin or sign?"

"They're one and the same. If you don't feel it, your mind's at fault — or maybe your heart. A marlin — a *blue* marlin — is a living fragment of God's bodily essence here on earth. Perhaps you should pray."

"A thousand dollars to watch a fish jump."

"Do you want to go back?"

"I want certification that I haven't made a fool of myself. 'Sarah, I spent a thousand dollars to see a marlin leap.' 'You're kidding, Tom. Is that all that happened?' " Hendrikson crossed his arms and clutched his shoulders. "That's all that's happened," he murmured. "I'm an idiot."

"We'll go back." Sister Alejandro returned to the pilot's wheel and tried to achieve ignition. The *Baptista's* engines did not respond. She made several more attempts and then reported her lack of success to her passenger.

"Radio for help," advised Hendrikson, disgusted with the entire business.

The radio, too, was out of commission. Dead in the water, the *Baptista* rose and fell on the rhythmically indifferent swells. Hendrikson suggested that they try to hail the charter boats off to starboard, but when they looked for these vessels' running lights they could see nothing but open water, darkness, and the dot-to-dot constellations overarching the gulf.

"I can't believe this!" Hendrikson exclaimed.

"You can't believe anything," Sister Alejandra said.

V

Belowdecks, the *Baptista* had a galley and one small sleeping cabin. The galley contained a small store of saltine crackers, all stale, and a single two-ounce tin of potted meat. To Hendrikson's amazement the only water aboard sloshed about sadly in the bottom of an uncapped Thermos in the icebox, which itself was not functioning. Sister Alejandra explained that Pelagians liked to fast at sea, and that anyway she had not planned to remain

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overnight aboard the little vessel.

"No one plans to be stranded," Hendrikson said. "But, for God's sake, you don't disregard the possibility!"

Angry, he took a blanket from the cramped cabin and went abovedecks to find a place to sleep. In the open air he began to feel an ironic resignation stealing over him. This would be better than the suffocating dormitory in that madhouse of a convent back in Cuerpo Divino. He might actually catch up on his lost shut-eye. His anger had driven off his queasiness, and the ocean would lull him like a great rocking cradle. A small blessing in the midst of his consummate folly.

For a time he did sleep, dreaming of rescue and home and the dear carnal fragrance of his wife.

He awoke to the drilling tattoo of raindrops on his neck. The wind had freshened from the northeast, pushing the *Baptista* ahead of it in spite of the cast-iron anchor that the sister had winched overboard, and the vessel's stern had already begun shipping water over the gunwales. A tempest, Hendrikson thought. This word had a cozy feel to it, a wistful Shakespearean taste, and he kept repeating it to himself as he hurried for cover. A tempest, after all, was survivable, whereas a hurricane — frightening, frightening word — could spell shipwreck and death, especially this far out. As he clambered into Sister Alejandra's cabin, it occurred to Hendrikson that hurricanes usually did not originate over the peninsula of New Castile, the direction from which the wind was blowing, and that to concern himself with something as stupid as the correct terminology for the storm was to ignore its most perilous immediate consequence. Hurricane, tempest, or squall, this unhappy butt-ender was driving them *away* from the safety of the Castilian coast.

The beam of Sister Alejandra's flashlight caught Hendrikson square in the eyes, and he cursed her roundly.

"Turn her about!" he shouted. "Turn this damned thing about!"

"How?"

"How the devil should I know?"

Sister Alejandra pointed her flashlight beam at the built-in sleeping bench on the opposite wall. "Sit down." Walking his hands across the paneling to maintain his balance, Hendrikson obeyed. The sister, on her way past him to the galley, handed him the flashlight. "Lie down if you like."

"I'll sit."

He heard pans rattling (a small metallic cacophony within the larger dissonance of the storm), and a moment later she had placed what seemed to be a lidless pressure cooker in his lap. It was cold and heavy.

"What's this for?"

"In case you need it. I don't want to spend the remainder of the night trying to clean up after you with flashlight and mop."

Although the storm — the tempest — howled and hurled lightning bolts

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for another five hours, slapping the *Baptista*'s beam and nudging her only Neptune knew where, Hendrikson did not have to use the pressure cooker. Toward morning, in fact, he even managed to sleep again.

Emerging from the hold, Hendrikson shielded his eyes against the sunlight winking from the chrome accouterments of the little boat. He and his pilot had survived. Strands of Sister Alejandra's hair were lifting like gossamer in the light morning wind. She herself was feeding stale crackers from the galley to a trio of sea gulls perched on the forward gunwales. The birds grabbed the saltines from her hands and greedily choked them down. If she missed a bird's turn, it rebuked her with an open-beaked screech that made Hendrikson's eardrums vibrate.

"You're giving away all we've got to eat on this tub!" he cried, startling the sister and scaring off two of the sea gulls. The third rose into the air, made a wheeling circuit of the boat, and settled back down quite near its original perch. Sister Alejandra gave it the last cracker. Hendrikson lunged forward. "Unless I strangle the bastard for breakfast!" Whereupon this bird, too, departed.

"It's only a little to give."

"It was everything we had!"

Sister Alejandra spread her arms and opened her hands as if to catch the sunlight. "But look at the day we've been blessed with."

The Day They Had Been Blessed With stretched into evening without their once sighting another vessel or even the wispy contrail of a jet in the aloof blue stratosphere. To keep themselves from sweating away too much bodily fluid, they retired belowdecks and passed the time playing gin rummy with a well-thumbed deck missing the king of swords. Hendrikson regularly popped upstairs to check the horizon (to no avail but the disruption of his game), and by sunset Sister Alejandra had won his Italian shoes, his monogrammed belt buckle, and his blustery animosity. Their predicament was growing serious. More alarming, except for the *Baptista* and themselves, the world suddenly seemed to be untenanted. Why had everything gone dead at the same time?

"I've got to have a drink," Hendrikson said.

Sister Alejandra fetched the Thermos from the icebox, and they each drank a quarter of a glass of water. Tomorrow they could have that same amount again. Then their provisions would be gone, and they would have to hope for either rescue or another rainfall from which to collect a stopgap supply of drinking water. Last night, Hendrikson realized, they had missed an opportunity to add to their pathetic stock.

"Why do you worry so? Abbess Florinda knows we're out here. She knows we should have been back yesterday. As soon as it's light again, we'll

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probably be picked up. They simply didn't find us today, that's all."

"They didn't come anywhere *near* us, Sister."

She twirled his clumsy brass belt buckle on the tip of her forefinger. "Go ahead and worry, then. Tomorrow evening you'll be sitting here in your underwear. Maybe you're being chastened, Mr. Hendrikson — purposely humbled."

This possibility had already crossed her passenger's mind. He removed the buckle from her finger, slid it back over the naked end of his belt, and, angrily cinching his trousers, climbed into the night to stare at the stars and to air out his inarticulate wrath.

After a while he could hear the calming susurrations of the sister's prayers. Slowly, gradually, shame displaced his anger.

VI

They were cut-adrift nobodies, Hendrikson decided. The rescuers that Sister Alejandra had predicted, and that he had made a tentative commitment to believe in, failed to materialize. The following day passed exactly like the first, and the day after that found them alone on a desert of salt water with nothing to drink or eat and no satisfactory notion of why their engulfment by this uncanny solitude should be so total. Forsaken. The sister's convent had apparently written them off, and the God on whose liquid spine they rode piggyback had either died or gone on holiday.

Blistered and cotton-mouthed, Hendrikson refused to stay in the passenger hold. He was afraid they would miss their rescuers if he stopped strolling the deck and scanning the horizon. The fact that the *Baptista* ought to be clearly visible to a search party even without his semaphoring figure at the gunwales, he chose to dismiss as wishful thinking. Let the sister call him crazy. Let her accuse him of scourging himself with the flails of heat and fatigue. Hot and hungry as he was, he did not mean to remain forever on the wastewaters of the gulf....

He opened his eyes and found himself lying on the deck in the shade of a linen tent that Sister Alejandra had erected over him after his collapse. She was wiping his face with a cloth dipped in sea water, but taking great care not to brush it over his mouth. The sun was going down again, the third time he had had to watch it set since coming on this asinine trip. What if he died? He could imagine Sister Alejandra unrigging her makeshift tent, wrapping him in the sheet, and shoving him overboard — ceremoniously, of course, but so what? He did not *want* to be buried at sea, committed to the saline digestive juices of a world-girding God. He wanted the crunch and crumble of honest loam on his coffin.

"Have them return my corpse," he said. "Back to White Sky."

"I could die here, too, you know,"

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the sister said. "Maybe you'd better write a note." She made this suggestion almost cheerfully, but her cheeks were gaunt and her lips both cracked and swollen.

Dizzy, Hendrikson sat up and touched her face. "Pray for us some more. Ask your God for something to eat."

"Fried chicken? Fish and chips?"

What an infuriating woman. She turned your own feeble sarcasms back on you as even feebler jokes. Only maybe he had not intended any sarcasm; maybe the frivolity of her reply bespoke an awareness of the depth of his worry for them both. He let his hand drop. She lowered her eyes and began quite softly to chant.

Darkness again. The hallucinatory splendor of the sea at night. Hendrikson, propped against the *Baptista's* beam, tried to center himself in the long hallucination of his thirst and hunger. The nearly inaudible chanting of the Pelagian, so close it seemed as secret as his own heartbeat, assured him that he had not yet died, but, somehow, not too menacingly, that extinguishing moment crept nearer and nearer. It was a shadow stalking him across the black-glass waves.

"There!" Sister Alejandra said.

He roused. As if in slow motion, a marlin — a blue marlin — rose into the air above the boat's prow and hung there gleaming like a magnificent if dire specter. Death, thought Hendrikson. Then the fish's swordlike snout inscribed a parabola through the spray, declining from the perpendicular to point directly at Hendrikson; and a moment later, twisting sidelong, the marlin crashed to the deck. The nose of the *Baptista* dipped beneath the impact. A terrific flouncing-about and beating of fins ensued. The fish slid on its own lubricants from one side of the little boat to the other, desperately writhing, its silver-blue fuselage bending and straightening until Hendrikson thought he heard bone snap. Only then did the marlin lie still. Now the panicked beating audible to Hendrikson was that of his own reviving heart. He had been scared out of his visionary grogginess by a vision as palpable as a club blow on the head. Sister Alejandra huddled near, and they embraced.

In the morning, as soon as they could see again, she said, "We'll have to eat it raw, Mr. Hendrikson. There's no way to do any cooking, I'm afraid."

"Eat a living fragment of God's bodily essence?"

"The sooner the better. Chew the flesh well and suck the juices." She carved a pair of hefty fillets from the marlin's flanks and returned with them to the tent. She was already chewing her own reddish white strip when she handed the other to her ward. "Go on. It's sweet. I can already feel my energy level rising."

Hendrikson ate. His strength returned. They scoured the horizons for help. No one came. The marlin, meanwhile, lay under the broiling sun in the

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Baptista's prow without any visible sign, or the least unpleasant odor, of corruption. Its irridescent colors did not fade, its huge round eyes glittered like opals. Sister Alejandra occasionally enlarged the wound from which she had first fed them, but assuming the body continued to resist putrescence, they could reasonably hope to eat of the great fish for another two weeks or more. Hendrikson prayed their ordeal would not last that long. He was ready to concede to the sister the power and validity of her religion. In fact, he finally told her so.

"Back in White Sky you'll forget."

"Not likely."

"Not likely, all right — but only because I don't think God's through with you. With us. There's more to come."

Irritated again, Hendrikson waved his hand. It was best not to get the sister started again. She domesticated miracles by philosophizing about them. Make a concession, and she gave you a lecture.

Late that afternoon they drifted into, or there surrounded them slowly, a vast floating carpet of indigo-umber sludge. An oil spill. Barrel upon barrel of petroleum vented from the hold of a tanker whose captain had probably believed that his ship was doomed unless he jettisoned a major part of its cargo. Maybe the very storm that had driven the *Baptista* away from the coast had panicked the tanker captain. Whatever the cause of the spill, Hendrikson stared at the glistering, rubbery mass with loathing. In comparison, the pollution to temples was a venial sin. He could not imagine the marlin of God breaking through this filthy skin to redeem them or anyone else with its flesh. How lucky they were not to have drifted into this spill before now.

By dark the *Baptista* sat in the middle of the sticky, quivering oil. Hendrikson and the sister ate of the marlin again and played cards by flashlight. Hendrikson was carrying the sister a second piece of the fish's seemingly inexhaustible flank when he noticed that the mantle of petroleum was retreating in an ever-expanding circle of which the *Baptista* was the center and focus. The cleansed water in the wake of the withdrawing oil had begun to glow. Luminous whitefish, shrimp, and diatoms quivered beneath the purified surface like a radiant bruise, an immense benign hematoma.

"Quick!" the man cried. "Come here!"

Sister Alejandra joined him at the rail. They clutched each other as the band in the water — the stunning glow — began to pursue the edge of the retreating sludge away from the *Baptista*. Now they were afloat in a circle of bleak but unsullied ocean. The band of flickering brightness that had just fled from them came rushing back, only to halt a good forty or fifty yards away, and a trough opened beneath their boat. They plunged toward the sea bottom while the watery wall enclosing this column remained intact

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around them, emanating a spectacular sheen. Hendrikson marveled at the sea creatures imprisoned in this wall, most of whom continued to swim about unperturbedly as the stars and galaxies still visible in the opening overhead hurtled toward the most distant limits of the universe. Sister Alejandra shouted something and slipped from Hendrikson's embrace, but the *Baptista* kept revolving clockwise — like the draining shower water that had once so upset him — downward through the shaft of this lazy maelstrom.

He was alone on the deck with the dead marlin. High above, spider webs of water were knitting a lattice on which a crystal-clear or maybe ebony jelly had begun to slide, moving from the opening's rim toward its center. This was the undersea cathedral's dome. Hendrikson stared upward at it in consternation and awe. The *Baptista* was being capped over. Sister Alejandra had left him. He wondered if she had run below to fetch the pressure cooker. No need, no need. His stomach was O.K., it was his heart that was threatening to burst from his mouth. He was alone on the deck with the unmistakably quickening fish. There in the prow it was stirring, thrashing gently.

"All life comes from the sea," Hendrikson said. "Every terrestrial creature has it origins in brine. The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, the waters gathered together, and God created great whales and every living creature which the waters brought forth abundantly after their kind." Whether he said these things aloud or only in his head, Hendrikson had no idea.

And then the marlin spoke.

Sister Alejandra and her passenger were rescued at the beginning of their seventh day in the gulf. Unremitting coastal rains had prevented seagoing parties from making much headway, while the aircraft dispatched from inland air bases had simply failed to make the crucial sighting that would have shortened their ordeal. Lifted into a helicopter sent over the *Baptista* by a Guardian de Dios cutter, the Pelagian nun and the dazed Heartlander seemed unready to talk of their experience. Furthermore, they stank. The helicopter pilot later informed the captain of the cutter that before they could tow the *Baptista* back to Cuerpo Divino, someone — preferably a couple of able-bodied seamen with no superstitious qualms — would have to dispose of the fetid marlin in the little vessel's prow.

This was done. But the captain had the fish's head cut off so that he could take the swordlike snout to his mother in Sarasota. This thoughtful gift pleased the devout woman a great deal.

VII

A dust devil blew across the terrace that Hendrikson's aging Elksmith trac-

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tor had just plowed. Although small, it reminded him of something that had happened to him many years ago off the New Castilian coast. Not too many people around White Sky gave much credit to his story, his wife Sarah being by far his strongest supporter, but he continued to tell it to whoever would listen. Indeed, he had actually made a few converts, one or two of whom were talking seriously about journeying to Cuerpo Divino to confirm his powerful experience with a witness of their own. Rumors that orthodox Pelagians had recently declared that God was no longer physically present in the seas, having withdrawn a second time from direct involvement in the affairs of men, had not shaken his friends' resolve to make the trip. The coasts were still holy.

Pirouetting and feinting, the dust devil spun beneath the white April sky. Even though it represented a rather commonplace phenomenon in this part of the country, its motion — its lifelikeness — made Hendrikson uneasy. He remembered a seasickness too big for any single human being to withstand alone and a speaking bioluminescence that even today gave him comfort.

In the enclosed cab of his tractor Hendrikson rummaged in his jeans pocket. Soon his fingers were clutching a rosary of fish bones. He lifted them into the light and counted them until the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach had gone completely away. Shortly thereafter he finished his plowing.

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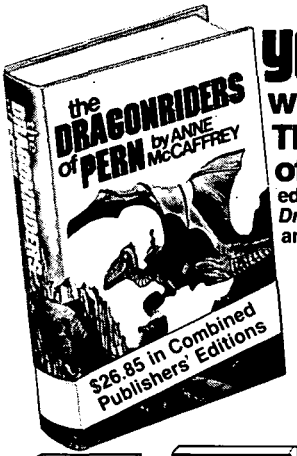

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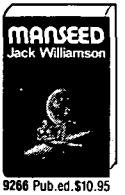

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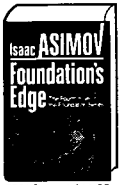

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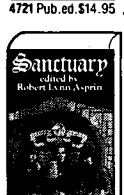

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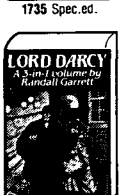

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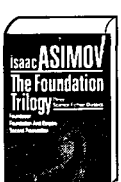

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